Faerie Blood: An Urban Fantasy Novel (The

Emma L. Adams

EMMA L. ADAMS
FAERIE BLOOD
THE CHANGELING CHRONICLES : BOOK ONE

Contents

Title Page

Copyright

About Faerie Blood

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Want More?

FAERIE BLOOD

The Changeling Chronicles: Book One

Emma L. Adams

This book was written, produced and edited in the UK, where some spelling, grammar and word usage will vary from US English.

Copyright © 2016 Emma L. Adams

All rights reserved.

Cover design by Rebecca Frank

About Faerie Blood

I’m Ivy Lane, and if I never see another faerie again, it’ll be too soon.

Twenty years after the faeries came and destroyed the world as we knew it, I use my specialist skills to keep rogue faeries in line and ensure humans and their magically gifted neighbours can coexist (relatively) peacefully.

Nobody knows those skills came from the darkest corner of Faerie itself.

When a human child disappears, replaced with a faerie changeling, I have to choose between taking the safe road or exposing my own history with the faeries to the seductively dangerous head of the Mage Lords. He’s the exact kind of distraction I don’t need, but it’s work with him or lose my chance to save the victims.

It’ll take all my skills to catch the kidnappers and stop Faerie’s dark denizens overrunning the city — but if the faerie lords find out about the magic I stole last time I went into their realm, running won’t save me this time…

Find the rest of my books on my Amazon page.

To be notified about my new releases and get a free short story, sign up to my author newsletter.

CHAPTER ONE

When I was sixteen years old, I walked out of hell, thinking I'd finally be free of the faeries.

Ten years later, the joke was on me. Instead of spending my Saturday morning sleeping in, there I was, deep in a troll's lair with a piskie hovering over my shoulder.

"He took my friend's charm," whined the piskie.

"Yes, you said." I hoped the faerie wasn't mistaken, if just because it'd mean I'd climbed into a troll's nest for nothing. I gritted my teeth, sorting through the array of junk the troll had gathered, searching for the telltale glint of a spell. Charms were notoriously tricky to get right, but given the wad of cash on offer, this one must be the real deal. I'd get a nice bonus if I returned it to its rightful owner.

In the suburbs, you took what work you could get. Even skulking around a troll's nest. I'd had to wait until it went off hunting before I risked sneaking in. I'd rank the danger level up there with putting a harness on a kelpie. But

at least kelpies didn’t smell like a blocked drain. Grimacing, I shoved a heap of what looked like human clothes aside—hopefully stolen, not the remnants of past victims. Trying to make faeries obey human laws was tricky at the best of times, but I was *not* sifting through troll dung to

figure out if it had recently consumed a human being or not. Luckily, that job fell to the clean-up squad, who were one rank below me on the less-than-impressive ladder of poor souls freelancing for Larsen Crawley.

The word “freelancer” sounded like it ought to mean something like

“dragon slayer”. In my case, that was almost literally true. But right now, the only things getting slayed were my already tattered new jeans and shoes. The low ceiling forced me to kneel in unappealing wetness to sift through another heap of old junk. Trolls had magpie-like tendencies for reasons I couldn’t fathom. I shoved a pile of expensive-looking jewels aside and found what I was looking for.

“Gotcha.” I picked up the small, glinting cylindrical charm. “What kind of spell is this?”

“Beautification,” said the piskie.

That figured. Damned half-faeries were posers and narcissists, one and all. I slid the charm into my pocket and headed towards the exit.

A shuffling noise ahead made me stop. Oh, shit. I’d planned to confront the creature later on for extra cash, but definitely not here in its cramped nest. Trolls were notoriously territorial. Great job there, Ivy.

Damn. The ceiling was high enough to account for the troll’s hulking frame, but with nowhere for me to hide. Which meant I’d have to break my own rule.

Don’t spill faerie blood in the mortal realm.

I reached for the sword I kept strapped to my waist. I don’t kill if I can avoid it, but it’s amazing how quickly an adversary will back off if you’re

pointing a sword at them.

As per usual, I'd hoped for too much. The troll saw the blade and bellowed, swinging a giant fist at me. I ducked, cursing the cave's tight walls. I needed to get to the exit, but the troll didn't seem inclined to move out the way. As the light filtering through the cracks in the ceiling landed on the creature, it was revealed in all its ugly glory. Trolls resembled misshapen boulders, which meant none of my hits would do any damage.

Its huge, lumpy body was resilient to virtually anything. Except—like all faerie-kind, with no exception—iron.

I repositioned myself, raising my sword, hoping it'd have the good sense to move. Unfortunately, expecting good sense from a troll is like expecting manners from a brain-eating boggart.

Rather than ducking, the troll took the hit. I hadn't put all my weight behind it, but a few years swinging a blade in defence of your life makes it difficult to judge the impact. Especially with faeries. The bright spray of blood made the troll scream in alarm, stomping its huge, hairy feet. Its fists drove me against the wall, step by step, until I stood ankle-deep in… troll dung.

Worse, the piskie had disappeared into thin air, leaving me to deal with the fallout.

"Take a hint," I snarled, swinging the blade again. A second spray of blood made the troll fall over its own feet towards me, driving me further back into the dung heap. "I'm sparing your life, you idiotic creature."

Said idiotic creature aimed another punch at my head. I ducked, and the troll's fist went through the back wall instead. The troll roared and tried to pull its hand free, sending bits of crumbling rock over my head.

Abandoning all restraint, I dropped to the ground, crawled between its legs and pointed my blade at its spine.

The troll flailed its free arm, howling—its other hand was stuck in the wall. I'd have laughed if I wasn't doing my absolute best to forget what I'd just

crawled through.

My blade gleamed, even covered in blood. Irene was my beauty: my faithful companion through ten years of fighting the evil forces of Faerie and laying down the law.

“Enough,” I said in my most dangerous voice. “I’m confiscating the charm you stole. A representative from the city’s council will be here shortly to question you and search for anything else you might have stolen.”

I suspected everything here in its nest was stolen, but I couldn’t help being fervently glad the interrogation didn’t fall on me. No. I was just the sword-for-hire, the runner of dangers. Someone who played nicer with others would be in charge of the interrogation.

As for me, I gave the troll one last warning tap on the spine with my sword. Faint red lines rose where I’d hit it: a result of faeries’ incurable allergy to iron.

“Evil Sidhe!” wailed the troll.

“I’m not Sidhe,” I said. “I’m human.”

The hilt of my sword struck the back of its head, and the troll crumpled, its hand still wedged in the earthen wall.

I grimaced. Blood and troll dung covered every inch of my clothes, which meant risking the landlord seeing me walk back into the flat in this state. I’d figured the job wouldn’t go smoothly and had set up a cleansing spell to remove the blood from my clothes ready for when I got home. Once I’d dealt with that, I’d collect my bounty. Faerie blood attracted all kinds of trouble. The kind worse than a pissed-off troll.

Twenty years on from the faeries’ arrival and we’re still cleaning up their mess. Summer and Winter Sidhe might have come to Earth to stop humans destroying one another, but when they buggered off home, they left us saddled with their henchmen squatting under our bridges and nesting in our

rafters. Most of the faeries who live around here have no allegiance either to the Seelie or Unseelie courts, because there's no way back to Faerie.

They probably fare better in our realm because there's a marginally lower chance of being flayed alive.

Isabel sometimes says faeries got the raw end of the deal. I'm not inclined to agree.

The piskie reappeared at my side as I set up a ward outside the troll's nest in case it woke up. "Thanks for the help," I said.

The piskie fluttered its tiny gossamer wings. "I am honoured, human."

I rolled my eyes. Faeries are the most literal creatures in existence.

My flat's on the east side of what used to be a suburb of south Birmingham. After the hot mess the faeries left behind when they left following the invasion, most newly exposed supernaturals laid claim to various parts of the newly created town. I lived between witch and shifter territory, while Larsen's place was situated between shifter and necromancer territories, right at the town's edge. In other words, the place there was most likely to be trouble. The building I approached was a squat red-brick construction. It served as the base for Larsen's offices as well as the clean-up squad, with various facilities open to freelance employees like the gymnasium and the target practise hall. I spent half my time there when I wasn't on jobs.

Larsen accosted me at the doors, wearing his usual scowl. His sloppy T-shirt and jeans getup wouldn't be out of place in a seedy bar. Then again, the local supernatural police unit's place was hardly an elite establishment.

Anyone who couldn't afford to hire a mage to solve their supernatural problems came to Larsen, but everybody knew his place was a last resort.

"There you are. I was beginning to think I'd need to send someone after you." He looked me up and down in the suspicious way I always hated, like he was looking for an excuse to lock *me* away. Why he thought being the

head of what amounted to a magical garbage disposal unit was worth lording it over everyone else was a mystery to me.

“I couldn’t come here covered in blood,” I countered. I’d showered and changed, leaving my ruined clothes to soak, and cleaned away every trace of the faeries. I still felt like the stench clung to my skin, though. Places like the troll’s nest smelled more like a sewer than pure Faerie, but my nose is sensitive to every trace. The faint aroma of decaying magic made my skin crawl like it wanted to leap clear of my body.

“Blood?” Larsen raised an eyebrow. “You were supposed to retrieve a stolen object, not cause a scene. Especially after last time.”

“Don’t worry. No one’s hurt. I got the charm, knocked out the troll and put a ward around its nest. When clean-up go down there later, there are a bunch of other items I’m pretty sure are stolen.”

“And just how did you take down a troll?”

“I cut it a little.”

“I thought you did.” He gave me another of his suspicious stares, eyes lingering on the sword re-strapped to my waist. I met his gaze, daring him to ask. My cover story was airtight, and I was hardly the only human capable of defending herself from supernatural creatures. I’d had more incentive than most.

Regularly escaping intact from fights with Faerie’s biggest, ugliest denizens tends to make people ask curious questions. Mostly it’s a combination of witch charms and a handy skill with a blade. Larsen wouldn’t know I had faerie magic unless I hit him in the face with it.

Humans, even witches and shifters, aren’t Sighted.

“Come in,” said Larsen.

I walked in through the grimy glass doors. A gorgeous woman waited in the lobby—the unnatural kind of gorgeous that practically advertised her

Summer Faerie heritage with a neon sign. Golden curls flowed to her waist, and her ears were slightly rounded. She couldn't pass as human, as far as half-bloods went.

"You found my charm?"

I pulled out the sparkling object. "No problem. This is a beautifying spell, isn't it?"

"Yes. I need that." She snatched it from my hands. *Please.* She thought she needed a beautification spell? Her smile might have caused a traffic accident, if she wore one. As it was, her full lips were curled down in a melancholy manner. Nobody pulled off melodrama quite like faeries.

It's a common trait in half-faeries whose parentage is from Summer or Winter, one I'd seen a lot. Those who didn't accept the human side of themselves often went out of their way to seem 'pure faerie' in any way possible. She was stunning. Model-worthy gorgeous. But she couldn't see past her own blood, which would never be good enough for Summer.

She might have sent me crawling into a troll's nest and showed zero gratitude for it, but I knew too well how easily the words of the Sidhe could worm their way into your head. I held her gaze. "Take it from me, though—

you really don't need it."

My good deed for the day done, I left the building before Larsen could jump on me again. I needed a stiff drink.

Stopping at my flat to change into something nice—finding a clean, bloodstain-free outfit was unsurprisingly difficult—I headed out to the local pub.

The Singing Banshee was a dingy place that catered to supernaturals and humans alike, so I wouldn't get too many stares walking in armed to the teeth. Two knives concealed up my sleeves, two at my ankles. Boots rather than strappy shoes, jeans rather than a short skirt. Long brown hair tied back, just in case. Simple, practical. The bartender, Steve, knew who I was,

so I perched on a stool in the bar's corner, safely hidden amongst the artificial smoke the pub used to hide supernaturals' auras so they wouldn't pounce on one another. My own magical aura was only visible to people

with the Sight and most faeries would have more sense than to wander into an establishment like this, but I appreciated the anonymity.

Two shots later and my annoyance faded to a pleasant buzz. Nobody approached me at the bar. I'd acquired a reputation since a sleazy necromancer tried to grope me a couple of years ago and triggered the stinging spell I kept hidden on me. The story ended up being exaggerated.

He'd regained the use of his hands again… eventually.

Being a weekend, the pub was more crowded than usual—scruffy shifters hanging out near the pool table, witches sipping cocktails in groups, and even the odd vampire sulking in a corner. I didn't expect to see the mages until a flock of them walked in, all long coats and posh, cultured accents.

This wasn't your typical mage hangout, so it came as no surprise when they started whining loudly about the terrible lighting. I liked this old, dingy place precisely *because* mages didn't come inside. Their territory was way over the other side of town, so what the hell they were doing here was anyone's guess.

A couple of them shot cursory glances my way, but I ignored them, concentrating on my drink and glad of the low light level. The word

'necromancer' floated my way and I tuned into their conversation long enough to gather they'd had a disagreement with the leader of the local Guild of Necromancy again. Luckily, the necromancers never came in here either. Nothing ruins a night out quite like an oncoming undead horde.

After I'd finished my vodka and coke and was about to quit, the mages traipsed off, still complaining that the place was a shithole.

The bartender, Steve, rolled his eyes after them. "Those mages think they're too good for everywhere."

“About right,” I said.

“I heard Larsen was being a dick again," said Steve, pouring me another shot. “This one’s on the house.”

“Cheers,” I said. Steve had been on my side ever since I’d helped him kick out a piskie infestation a few years ago. “I needed that. Ended up neck-deep in a troll’s nest earlier.”

“You ought to ask for hazard pay,” he said. “It’s exploitation, what Larsen does.”

“It’s work.” I shrugged. “I get the benefits and accept the hazards. If I asked for a raise I’d be out on the streets.” I had no intention of ending up out there again. I’d grabbed the job ten years ago when people were desperate enough to hire anyone to help their supernatural-related problems, even a sixteen-year-old girl. I’d clung to the position ever since, though I wondered why I bothered more than I cared to admit. I grimaced as I knocked back the shot, knowing Isabel would accuse me of running away from my problems again.

I don’t see anything wrong with running away from problems that’d happily eat me alive.

A shout rang across the bar and I snapped my head around, the back of my neck prickling. My eyes traced over the crowd until they landed on a short, dishevelled man in jeans and jacket, too far away for me to make out his features.

“Not Swanson again,” said Steve, resting his elbows on the counter.

I turned back to the bar, watching the man out of the corner of my eye.

“Who?”

“Swanson. Guy over there… his kid went missing last night.”

A chill raced down my spine. Hearing those words always sent my mind careening in directions I didn’t want it to, even though children

disappearing was hardly uncommon here in the suburbs where supernaturals and humans mingled and the faeries had left irreversible damage.

Swanson stood, moving into the light so I had a better view of the scene.

The man he spoke to, who'd been hidden in shadow, wore a suit entirely too well-tailored for an establishment like this. His strong-boned face, well-combed hair and smart attire would have drawn my attention even if he hadn't pulled out the sword.

It's not unheard of to see someone carrying a sword on the street. It's less common to see someone pull a hand-and-a-half-long sword out of *thin air.*

My second thought was that the first guy had picked a fight with the worst possible opponent in the room—including me.

I kept stock-still. If I moved now, I'd draw attention to myself. Mage Dude lazily pointed the sword, but from his stance, I could tell he knew

how to use it. If the other guy so much as moved, his opponent could lunge in one quick motion and take his head clean off.

Yeah, I shouldn't have left the flat tonight.

I couldn't look away. It was like watching the burning aftermath of a car wreckage. The guy who'd yelled sank back in his seat, stark terror flitting across his expression.

"Shit," he said. "I didn't know you were—"

"Lord Colton, the head of the mages," said Steve, behind me. "Oh, boy.

He's in trouble."

I felt the blood drain from my own face. The guy was the head of the goddamned mages, and he'd just walked right past me. If he'd seen me… if he'd seen the telltale glow of faerie magic around me… my cover would be blown.

I looked down, the table cold against my hands as I gripped the edges.

Few things in this world scare me, but this particular master mage had acquired a reputation and a half in the last few months he'd been in office.

Rumour had it he kept a bunch of troll heads hanging from the corridor walls inside the mages' headquarters. Yet I didn't give a rat's ass whether *he* knew about my unconventional magic—I cared more about word reaching places I didn't want it to.

I glanced up at the Mage Lord, unable to help myself, but whatever glow magic cast around him was smothered by the dim bar lights. He wasn't all that old, not like the last Mage Lord I'd had the displeasure of meeting. He didn't look mad, either, but then again, appearances can be deceptive.

Anyone who's been around faeries knows that.

Lord Colton leaned across the table to watch the man who'd shouted at him, who now looked like he was pretending to be part of the furniture.

"If you'd like to have a more civilised conversation before things get nasty, what did you wish to ask me?"

"My kid," said the guy. "He went missing a week ago. The police are doing nothing, your people are doing nothing, and we're out of options."

"I thought that's what you shouted at me," said the Mage Lord. "Missing persons aren't my area, unless you wish to hire one of my mages. We charge reasonable rates."

"Do you, now?" The man appeared to recover some of his confidence, leaning forward. "Your doorman slammed the door in my face."

Oh, man. He'd picked a fight with the wrong guy, that was for sure. Mage Dude didn't look angry—that I could tell from this distance, anyway—but the sword's gleam had drawn the attention of everyone in the bar. Most people seemed glad of the fake smoke to hide behind. Including me, come to that. I couldn't help giving the Mage Lord a cursory examination,

wondering what his gift was. And also wondering why all their leaders seemed to be Generic Thirty-Something Man in Suit. This man, though… I wouldn't call him *generic.* The light of his blade was reflected in stormy grey eyes visible even through the smoke, and barely-restrained power crackled above his shoulders like he'd brought a full lightning storm right into the bar. How in the name of the Sidhe had nobody noticed him before?

To have so much power and still be able to sneak around unseen made the man possibly the most dangerous *human* magic user I'd ever seen.

His voice, however, betrayed nothing. "If you wish to hire one of my mages, please address all correspondence to my receptionist, Wanda. I don't take bribes, and unless magic is involved in this case, it's absolutely none of my business."

Friendly. What a piece of work. And I'd thought the other mages were bad. Why had they gone while their leader stayed behind, anyway? Weird.

Missing kid or not, threatening the head of the mages was a good way to end up with your head on a pike.

I shouldn't have had the impulse to get involved. Gritting my teeth, I ducked my head as Mage Dude's gaze swept the bar. *Go away,* I thought at him.

At last he left, his long coat sweeping behind him. Like the sword wasn't dramatic enough.

I breathed out, the tension in the room easing. Everyone returned to their previous conversations, though considerably muted. *Mages never come in here,* I heard more than once. *Creepy as the necromancers, they are.*

"Scary dude," said Steve. "I didn't even see him come in."

"Probably blended into the crowd," I said. Or used a mage trick. Like with the sword. What the hell kind of magic was that? Most mage magic was flashes and sparks, fire and lightning. Not screwing with the laws of

physics. Magic rarely astounded me these days, but that was a hell of a party trick.

“Right, I’m off.” I hopped off my stool. I’d had entirely too much excitement for what was supposed to be a quiet night off. Isabel was off at a coven meeting, so I’d have an early night before anything else happened.

Wishful thinking.

I trailed up to the flat, scanning the shadows out of habit. Our small flat lay in the grey area between witch and shifter territories, the best we could get for as low a price as possible, so occasionally, nasties from work followed me home. Wards blazed from every corner, protecting us from just about every kind of supernatural threat, and an unbroken ring of magic-forged iron also surrounded the place. Just in case. The garden was empty save for some flowerbeds of herbs Isabel used for her spells. The closest I’d come to telling her about Faerie was when I’d explained why I’d prefer not to have plants *inside* the house. The scars all over my body from a bad experience involving a faerie’s magical thorns turning me into a human pincushion spoke for themselves. But even Isabel didn’t know how it had really happened.

Once over the boundary, I relaxed my guard and approached the doorstep.

Then I stopped, heart sinking, as a figure stepped from the shadows.

Angry Dude Swanson from the pub waited outside my flat.

CHAPTER TWO

Swanson, whose kid went missing, and who'd managed to piss off the head of the Mage Lords, looked at me with desperation in his eyes. I could put two and two together pretty easily.

"You want to hire me?" I asked.

A nod. If the wards had let him in, he didn't intend me harm, and he was pure human to boot. He was far from the only client to visit me after working hours, but after what I'd seen at the pub, I'd only trust him if the wards let him through the door.

"I usually close after five, but you can come inside for a chat."

Sometimes, I want to knock myself for being too nice. But after the way that obnoxious mage had treated him, I just didn't have it in me to turn him away. Besides, I needed the money.

Or so I told myself.

Thanks to Isabel's top-notch dirt-repelling wards, no blood or questionable stains remained on the stairs or in the carpeted hallway from when I'd walked in here in my ruined clothes. She'd put the spell over our flat a few years ago when I'd come back from a bad job covered in redcap entrails. Try scrubbing the insides of a faerie out of the carpet with an irate

landlord hovering over your shoulder. My bloodstained clothes, meanwhile, were soaking in the bathroom, so the flat smelled strongly of spell-disinfectant. I switched on a couple of lamps before Swanson stumbled over the many obstacles littering our living room. This room also doubled as Isabel's workshop and had so many warding spells on it that if Swanson had meant me any kind of ill intent, he'd have been bodily thrown outside. As it was, he nervously hovered near the door as I locked it.

A piskie flitted overhead. "Get out," I told it. This specimen, who went by the name of Erwin, had been here almost since we had, and no amount of iron would deter the little bugger from flying around like he owned the place. The inside of the flat remained dark, aside from the faint glow of Isabel's ever-burning candles around the pentagram chalk-drawn into the middle of the carpet. Very good job the landlord rarely came around to inspect.

The piskie buzzed into the kitchen and I closed the door on it, smothering a sigh. How the creature had managed to continuously fly past our iron wardings, I'd probably never know. It had the intelligence and attention span of a gnat.

Swanson looked a little alarmed at the display of potions on the coffee table and the five-pointed star on the carpet. Well, I didn't have an office, and Larsen's place was closed. "Sit down," I said. "I'd offer you a drink, but I guess you've had a few already."

He didn't look angry. Just tired, eyes sunken with a despondent look I tried not to look to closely at. This was going to be rough. Maybe I needed another drink after all. "What happened?"

He cleared his throat. "Dustin didn't come home last week after a night out. It's not the first time, but… I got a bad feeling. He's been in trouble before

and the police won’t help. I’ve tried everything,” he said, his voice rough and scratchy. The desperate undertone clawed me somewhere deep inside. Because even if I could afford to be picky with the jobs I took on, I couldn’t quell the instinctive response. Missing children cases—missing children in a city teeming with magic and savage monsters—were my kryptonite.

“What’s your offer?” I asked.

“Ten thousand.”

My jaw hung loose, at least until I schooled my expression back into something resembling professionalism. Ten grand would more than make up for my erratic rent payments. I might even be able to rent a proper office.

Wait a second. The guy cast a shifty look over his shoulder. I’d chalk it up to not wanting to be overheard, except I’d sealed the door, and he’d seen me do it.

“What else?” I gave him my best *no bullshit s* tare. “What haven’t you told me? There’s got to be a reason you picked a fight with the head of the mages. And don’t tell me you wanted him to put a hex on the police. You know mages don’t deal with missing people.”

“No,” said the man, “but I thought they might deal with changelings.”

The word rang through my head. I stood rigid, a trickle of sweat running down the back of my neck. Cursing my body’s instinctive response to the word.

Changeling.

I was getting the hell off this case. Now.

“Sorry, I can’t help you,” I said crisply. “I’m strictly for human cases, or minor spellwork. Nothing faerie-related.”

The guy’s face went pasty. “Please.”

God damn you. No. I couldn’t. Searching for missing kids? I took every case, even the ones with the worst outcome. But not if the Sidhe had taken them. Their realm and ours were severed. Changelings didn’t—shouldn’t—

exist. Not anymore.

“Twenty thousand.”

“Fuck.” The curse escaped before I could stop it. “It’s not the money I care about. I don’t deal with—them.”

“Then why do you have a piskie living in your house?”

“Piskies are harmless household pests. Faerie lords are… not.” There were a hell of a lot of things I might say in place of ‘not’. Like sadistic dickheads with a penchant for torturing humans for kicks—but I couldn’t say it in front of him. That fact alone was reason enough to turn him down and walk away with my life and sanity intact. But the guilt would burrow deep inside me if I said no. I’d never be rid of it.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my tone softening. “I don’t think I can be much help.

If it *is* a faerie… I wouldn’t even know where to start looking. You should talk to the mages again. They know more than I do.”

A lie. I didn’t know every corner of the city like the mages did, but I knew more about the faeries than a lifetime of therapy would erase. And I knew you only escaped their realm alive once.

“Please.” His voice cracked on the word.

Dammit. “Tell me what happened. If the faerie isn’t in our realm anymore, nobody can follow. I’m not refusing to help, I’m stating a fact.

How do you know it’s a changeling?”

“He’s not acting like Dustin. He… he tried to kill our dog. There was blood everywhere. He’s thirteen and usually mature for his age, but I’ve seen him

talking to the faeries before. I just got a horrible vibe. I found him surrounded by spells and… dead things."

I shivered, trying to hide my reaction. "Have you tried iron wardings around the house?"

His blank look told me he hadn't lied about his lack of knowledge, at least.

"Okay," I said. "You probably need a crash course in all things Faerie. I can't promise it'll be pleasant. But for now, put an iron ward around your whole house. Here." I leaned over to the coffee table, careful not to knock any of the candles over, and picked up a metallic-coloured band. If activated, it'd cover the immediate area in a faerie-proof ward. Isabel had a whole cupboard full of them. Our own flat had more powerful wards on the outside—the effect of this iron spell wouldn't last more than a week. Which meant I needed to act fast to solve the case.

He took the band, wearing a sceptical expression. "So does this mean the faeries are coming… like the ones that came twenty years ago?"

"No," I said, a little too sharply. "Those were Summer and Winter Sidhe lords, and it's against their laws to steal human children. If it's a changeling, we're looking at someone who's breaking the laws of both realms."

"Jesus. Why would they pick us? We're not magical."

I opened my mouth then closed it. I never understood how faeries' minds worked. I hadn't been magical, either, when I was taken. It didn't seem to

matter. Some people just drew the shitty straw. "I'll ask more questions tomorrow," I said. "Once we've figured out what happened. If the faerie involved is still in this realm, I can help. If not…"

His eyes went wide. "The Faerie realm…"

"The realms run parallel," I explained. "But only highly adept Sidhe lords can cross over. The one exception was the invasion." Which I'd missed most of. "Sidhe lords operate on their own rules. If they wanted to cross

between realms… I can’t pretend I understand how it works, but I know humans can’t do the same. Hell, most faeries living on this side can’t go back to their own realm. They’re stuck here.”

His eyes widened further with every word. Poor guy. “I’ll come back tomorrow.”

“If you give me your address, we can deal with it at yours,” I said. “I’ll bring my standard contract. Unless you’d like to sign now.”

“Yes,” he said immediately.

Huh. I sat in the shadows of a witch’s living room with the smell of blood and spell-disinfectant lingering around. Hardly the definition of professional. But he *was* desperate.

“Okay.” I crossed the room to the writing desk, which was also covered in witch paraphernalia. I shifted a stack of spell ingredient lists aside and found the form, which multiplied itself at my touch. Swanson gawped at me, his bloodshot eyes widening. Witches might not be into flashy magic, but they had a fair few party tricks of their own. I handed him the form copy, which already displayed my signature and my terms. His eyes roved over the page, but I knew he didn’t take in a word. He was desperate enough to trust a stranger with his son’s life.

Someday, maybe I’d feel pride, not guilt at the realisation. Isabel’s spells are the best in the region. I’ve no trouble tracking people within *this* realm.

Bring in the faeries, though, and all bets were off.

“That okay?” I asked, when he’d handed me the signed form. “Call me tomorrow morning and we’ll get started. I can’t make any promises. Faerie magic isn’t something most humans understand. I certainly don’t.”

More of a white lie this time, but I’d rather not get his hopes up any more than I had to. Swanson nodded, mumbling thanks, as I unlocked the door

and let him outside.

I took some calming breaths and considered the facts. No Sidhe had entered our realm in over twenty years. No human had crossed between the realms in ten, as far as I knew. The other faeries left behind after the invasion, based on my shaky knowledge, had no way back.

Which meant there was a chance the person who'd taken Swanson's child was still here, somewhere, in this realm. I'd need to see the fake 'child' to get to the bottom of how they'd created one in the first place.

I hadn't seen a changeling in thirteen years. Tomorrow was *not* going to be fun.

I was lugging my ruined clothes from the bathtub when Isabel came in, the door clicking shut behind her. She waved at me, wearing one of her usual long flowery dresses and more shiny bangles on her slim brown arms than the inside of the troll's nest. Despite her innocent appearance and general mild-mannered nature, she could hold her own in a fight. I'd once seen her kick a half-ogre twenty feet through a window. And she was five feet tall and probably weighed a hundred pounds, if that.

"Wow," she said. "I take it the case didn't go well?"

"It went." I examined my jeans, wondering how many times I could stitch them back together before they came apart at the seams. Probably one less time than I'd done it. Looked like I was due for another shopping trip, with the money I didn't have.

Yet.

Isabel moved to clear a bunch of odd spells off the living room sofa. To a non-magic user, the place looked like it belonged to a stationary fanatic.

Most of her spells took the form of rubber bands, while her handmade point-and-shoot explosives looked like fancy pencils. Most witches were encouraged to make their spells look like household objects because it reassured clients the arcane forces witches used were relatively harmless.

Or something. I didn't blame Swanson for his alarmed reaction, considering the number of symbols drawn onto the ceiling in sharpie and the burn stains on the carpet from over-enthusiastic sessions testing her latest explosive spells. As a prominent member of one of the local witch covens, Isabel's the best at both offensive and defensive witch magic. She also happens to be my closest friend.

"Someone was here," she said, wrinkling her nose. "A client?"

"New one, yeah." I sank into an armchair. I had to sink, because the second-hand furniture had a tendency to collapse without warning.

"I wouldn't tell the landlord," said Isabel. "You know what he's like about letting 'weirdos' into the flat."

I snorted. "Has he ever met us?"

She grinned and shook her head. "Weirdos who don't pay rent.

Whichever."

"We don't always," I reminded her. Witches earned a pittance, while my own payments depended on whether Larsen was feeling particularly generous. Jobs had been few and far between lately, and he only suffered to let me keep coming into the guild because I kept all the nasty faeries away.

Like keeping a bad-tempered cat to get rid of a mouse infestation.

"This new case." Isabel smiled at me. "You never go for the easy options, do you? What's the catch?"

"It's a tricky one," I admitted, not wanting to go into specifics. There was still a chance Swanson had imagined the changeling part. Funny how those legends stuck around, when the last changeling case was so many years ago. I'd told Isabel the bare bones of what had happened—just enough that she didn't question my eccentricities. Though she'd been a kid when her kind came out of hiding in the aftermath of the Sidhes' arrival, she'd never

seen one of them. They hid themselves well. Unless they wanted you to see them. Creepy fuckers.

“Tricky how?”

“Missing kid, suspected faerie involvement,” I said. “The mages refused to help, so I couldn’t say no.”

“Missing kid?” She studied me in such the way she always did when I brought up the missing child cases I’d been involved in. I tried not to give too much away, but there were only so many conclusions she could draw from my interest in those particular cases. She knew I was an orphan, but not the details. When it comes to my past, ‘complicated’ is an understatement.

“Yeah.” I always, without fail, took those cases. Even if the outcome was the worst. “We’ll need a detection charm, I think. But there might be

complications. I need to visit the Swansons’ house first. Just in case he’s mistaken his own kid for an evil faerie. It can happen.”

Isabel gave me one of her *you’re bullshitting me* looks, but went over to the coffee table. “You gave him an iron spell?”

“Had to, really. He doesn’t know about faerie wards. The mages left him in the dark.” Or one guy in particular. I shoved away the image of the lethal blade appearing from nowhere. Whatever the Mage Lord had been doing in this part of town, I’d probably never see him again.

“I’ll prepare the base for the spell.” Isabel cleared a space on the coffee table. “I’ve always wanted to try this one again.”

“You’re the best, you know that?” She didn’t charge me for spells, even the complicated ones. I’d have hired her as my assistant if she’d wanted the job, but after seven years being flatmates, I’d given up trying to offer her money. Her argument was that she enjoyed what she did.

I wouldn’t say I *enjoyed* my job most of the time, but my skillset doesn’t leave many options open. Since I came back home, mundane jobs have felt as out of reach as the world before the faeries came. My CV consists of survival and stabbing things. I didn’t play nicely in a team, and had got fired from the one bar job I’d had after an argument with a half-faerie got out of hand.

It was a wonder I’d even found a flatmate. I put in my ad, “Requirements: a high tolerance for weirdness. No music, loud or otherwise. Faerie-proof charms required. Again, ABSOLUTELY NO MUSIC OF ANY KIND.”

And it worked. Witches needed dead silence to practise their spells, and Isabel accepted my low tolerance for noise as a given. As for the ‘high tolerance for weirdness part’, I’d lucked out. Isabel knew some of my demons, but not all of them.

I walked into the bathroom to retrieve my clothes, removing the cleansing spell—another rubber-band-shaped device, this one blue—and washing the crumbling remnants down the drain. For a brief moment, the imprint of a swirling vortex of lines hovered above it, a remnant of the potent magic present in faerie blood.

I’ve learned not to trust my own senses when it comes to the faeries.

Leaving the room, I decided to double up on the wards around my room

tonight, even if it meant making that piskie hate me for the next week. I prefer to keep my demons caged.

CHAPTER THREE

The following morning started with a blissful five minutes imagining I'd actually get to lie in on a Sunday, before a shrill noise brought me crashing back to reality. Groaning, I rolled over and picked up my phone. It was an old touchscreen model I'd bought second hand and had a jagged cut down the screen, but it worked well enough. "Hello?"

"Ivy Lane? This is Mr Swanson."

Oh crap. God help me, I'd said yes. I swung my legs over the bed and did my absolute best to sound like a professional. "Hi. Did you manage to get the iron ward set up?"

"We did, but the changeling escaped."

Dammit. "I'll be there in five minutes."

I hung up without mentioning Isabel. Good job I'd showered extensively the day before to wash every taint of faerie blood from my skin. I hurriedly dressed and grabbed my handbag, plus knives, which I shoved into their

holsters. I kept them by my bed for easy access, along with jars of salt, iron filings, and herbs that repelled various other supernatural menaces.

Isabel raised an eyebrow as I ran past, grabbing the spells she'd prepared from the table and shoving them into my backpack. "I take it you don't

have time for cookies."

Dammit. Isabel's baking is possibly the best in existence. The world really hates me sometimes.

"Save me some for later," I said. "I've got to talk to this guy first."

"Okay. I'll probably be at the Cavanaughs' upstairs. Their ceiling's leaking and I said I'd help with a spell."

"Cool." I pulled out my phone again to check on Swanson's address, groaning as I realised I'd have to ride the bus. I didn't used to mind public transport, but most bus drivers hated me by this point because of all the times I'd collapsed onto their buses covered in blood from jobs at the far end of town. I sucked it up and walked to the bus stop. The day was crisp and clear for early autumn, ragged leaves blowing through the streets. The picture of mundaneness, at least on the outside.

Because it was clearly going to be one of Those Days, a half-faerie got onto the bus one stop after me and proceeded to loudly complain to the driver about my not-concealed iron weapons. I jumped off two stops early and ran the rest of the way.

The houses turned from broken-down old blocks of flats to rows of nice suburban houses like a picture of the old world. The roads had no potholes, the parks were well maintained, and everything seemed to shine like someone had flung a dirt-proof ward over the entire area. Probably true, considering I stood on the brink of mage territory. Some people even had working televisions. I stared through the window of a particularly nice house for a moment, watching two kids run around. Was this how my own childhood had been, minus the magic? This part of town didn't look like a war had hit it. There was nothing left of the place I'd grown up in.

Idiot. Quit gazing into history and get on with the job.

I turned into the right street and approached the house the Swanson family lived in. Nothing seemed out of place, though the slight shimmering around the door showed Swanson had managed to get the iron ward I'd given him set up. Was the changeling hiding inside the house, or had it ran outside?

One way to find out. I rang the doorbell, shifting my backpack on my shoulder.

Swanson answered, looking like he hadn't slept. His greying hair stood up all over. Several scratch marks on his arms showed the changeling had revealed its true colours, unless he'd been attacked by something else.

"Hey," I said. "I'm set. Where's… the changeling?" I'd almost said 'your son', but that was more a desperate attempt at optimism talking. If it turned out his son was into dark magic, it could be dealt with. Faeries, though…

"The changeling's hiding," he said. "It saw the iron and ran."

Great. Luckily, I'd come prepared. Each kind of faerie needed slightly different bait, so I'd stashed a variety in my backpack. Changelings were an oddity, though, and not one I knew enough about to make an educated guess on how to catch it.

"What are you doing?" asked Swanson as I crouched in the hallway and began sifting through the contents of my bag. Isabel colour-coded her spells and trackers took the form of green rubber bands. I took one in my hand.

"Tracking the changeling." I held the spell for him to see. "This is witch-made. I normally use them on humans, but it ought to work on faeries, too."

Swanson didn't move. "I thought you were going to find my son."

"I'll need to find out whereabouts the changeling came from before I can track your son down." Though tracking humans was easier. "Hmm.

Unless… do you have anything of your son's I can use? Hair works best."

Swanson retreated into the hallway. Every nerve in my body told me this was a bad idea. If his son had been taken out of this realm, I didn't like to think what effect that would have on the spell. If it brought the faeries right here…

Calm down. This place is warded. Yet that didn't reassure me. I hovered in the hallway while Swanson went upstairs, and came back with a few golden curls of hair.

"I'll have to do the spell inside the house," I said. "It's warded, so if anything happens, you'll be protected from damage." I hoped.

Swanson looked alarmed. "Damage?"

"It'll be fine." I couldn't cover the lie in my voice this time.

Swanson led the way into the living room, where a pale, dark-haired woman sat with her head in her hands. Bloodshot eyes met mine.

"Are you here to help find our son?"

"I'm going to use a tracking spell, if that's okay." I held up the band. "I can track your son, but only if he's still in this realm."

Those words had the exact effect I'd dreaded. Two sets of horrified eyes stared at me. "In this realm?"

"If he was taken to Faerie—like I said, I can't follow. I don't know what effect it'll have on the spell. I'm telling you this as a warning. Do you still want me to try?"

"Yes, of course." Swanson nodded, eyes following as I set the spell down on the carpeted floor, where it expanded into a circular shape. My heart was already hammering. I didn't feel like the expert here, but I knew I looked and sounded calmer than I actually was.

I subtly shifted the sword at my waist, ready to grab it if things turned bad. Then I threw the golden hairs into the centre of the spell's base. Green light flared up around the edges, and I leaned forward. To them, it'd look like a

meaningless blur of lights. To anyone who could sense magic, it would show me the location of the person I tracked.

Or, it should. The lights swirled, becoming patterns that almost made me too dizzy to watch. I held my breath.

The spell winked out, the lines of the circle turning grey. Lifeless.

An icy chill ran down my spine. For the spell not to work meant one of two things: the faerie had put a spell-resistant charm on its captive… or it had left this realm behind.

I looked up at two stricken faces. “Didn’t it work?” asked the woman.

So they’d seen something. “Are either of you magically sensitive?”

A pause, then she shook her head. “Why?”

“I can’t think of a motive for why your son was taken. The spell didn’t work, but I can track the changeling instead.”

“Why didn’t it work?” croaked Swanson. “Is he—gone? You mentioned the Faerie realms yesterday… you said faeries can’t cross over. How can they have taken him?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “Faerie magic works on a different level to what we understand.”

“You’re a witch, right?”

“Yes. Tracking’s my specialty. But not outside this realm. As for the rules of Faerie, nobody knows them.”

And technically, faerie lords *could* cross over, under special circumstances like the invasion. Nobody knew how they did it. One day, the world was on the brink of WWIII. The next, magic had exploded across the country and brought a flock of dangerous faerie warriors along with it who cared nothing for collateral damage as they razed half our city to the ground.

“No one?” Swanson echoed. “But… but the faeries. Can’t you talk to *them?”*

I would have laughed if the situation hadn’t been so serious. *Talk* to them.

Faeries either wanted to eat me or steal from me. Or both. Only the piskie living in my flat had ever made conversation with me, but it had the IQ of a goldfish and couldn’t remember where it had come from. Probably born here.

“Not really,” I said. “Most faeries around these days were born in this realm after the invasion, or fled when the realms opened. They don’t belong to Summer or Winter. And I doubt they know how magic works. Most faeries on this side don’t have any.”

Once the war stopped and life had ground to a standstill, the Sidhe lords left, the doors closed, and everything magical stopped going haywire. At least, that’s what I’d heard from Isabel, because I’d been absent at the time.

From what people knew of the two main Courts, Summer and Winter were under strict governance and their inhabitants were usually forbidden to come to Earth unless under special circumstances. But in between Summer and Winter existed a kind of neutral zone where the rules didn’t apply. It made sense the faerie came from there.

I really, really hoped it didn’t.

Swanson seemed to consider this. “Okay. Can you track the changeling, then?”

“I can try.” I doubted a simple changeling would have the power to cross over between realms, so at least it’d still be in the mortal world. I put away the dead spell and pulled a fresh one from my backpack, setting it up in the middle of the floor. Scorch marks remained from the first one, but they’d fade.

“Do you have anything the changeling left behind?” I ought to have thought of that first. This whole situation had rattled me, made me forget the basics

of my job.

Swanson nodded, and walked into the hallway. “We cleared away everything he set up, but his room’s… a mess.”

Oh boy, I thought, remembering what he’d said yesterday. Gritting my teeth, I followed him into the hallway and up the carpeted stairs. Through the door on the right lay what looked like the inside of some twisted mad scientist’s lab. Or a witch whose power had gone bad. Symbols were etched all over the walls, unfamiliar glyphs that made the hairs rise on my arms.

Blood soaked into the carpet, and several small furry bodies lay in the centre of a circle. Rats. I pressed a hand to my mouth, trying to calm my breathing.

“This… it’s black magic.” Most witches didn’t label magic as ‘good’ or

‘evil’, but any spells that involved killing were strictly forbidden by the Mage Lords. Why the hell would a faerie changeling be messing with these props?

Swanson hesitated by the door, his expression telling me he was as reluctant to go into the room as I was. But one of us had to. I quickly stepped over the threshold, gaze averted from the blood, searching out any object that didn’t have magical properties. Throwing anything related to dark magic into the middle of a tracking spell would have consequences I couldn’t begin to imagine. Everything—claw cuttings, knives, burned-black spell triangles—had *do not touch* written all over them.

Behind were the sports posters, books and video game collection of an ordinary teenage boy. I concentrated on that image. I was doing this to save an innocent person from the faeries. An innocent person who didn’t have magic.

Just like I hadn’t.

I crouched down, searching the carpet. Several fine hairs lay there, but at first glance, I couldn’t tell if they belonged to the human or the changeling.

I held them up to the light. Silver. Most faeries had silvery hair, or jet black.

And they shed more than humans did.

My eyes fell on a second circle scrawled behind the first. For a second, I thought I saw movement. Then I glanced down, past the dead rats' bodies,

and saw the glyphs carved into the carpet. "Holy crap. It's a summoning circle." I knew what *those* looked like. Necromancers used them to summon dead spirits. Not a branch of magic I was particularly an expert in.

Why would a changeling use death magic?

Dammit. "I'm going to have to dismantle it," I told Swanson. "I can't leave it unattended up here even if the changeling's gone."

I'd call the necromancers, but they lived on the other side of town. This was mage territory, and they had as little to do with necromancy as I did. If I didn't dismantle this circle before the changeling came back, this house might turn into a portal to hell.

Just for once, I'd have preferred a weekend lie-in like a normal person.

Doing my best to avoid stepping in the blood, I skirted the first, blackened spell circle, stopping momentarily to examine the damage. Someone had used a spell with those dead rats, but if the circle had burned out, either the spell hadn't worked or the effects were gone. I'd have noticed if any magic surrounded this place before I came in.

I wasn't stupid enough to touch the circle itself. I reached into my pocket for one object I always kept on hand—salt. Didn't do a thing for faeries, but after the infamous zombie night five years ago when an idiot necromancer apprentice had left the doors of the local cemetery unlocked, the local council still advised everyone to take precautions. Carefully, I sprinkled the stuff around the circle's outskirts.

Blue-green light flared up, without warning. I jumped back, shielding my eyes.

A chilling shriek rang out, and a thin line of blue light appeared, leading from the circle out the room’s door.

“What the hell?”

Then I saw the second circle, hidden so thoroughly beneath the first that I’d have needed super-sensitive eyesight to spot it.

A high-pitched scream came from downstairs. Swanson’s wife.

Oh, shit.

CHAPTER FOUR

I vaulted both circles and ran downstairs without pausing for breath, my sword already in my hand. Whatever attacked them, Irene and I could take care of it. Swanson shouted out, and I leaped the last two stairs.

Mrs Swanson ran from the living room, pursued by something big, black and furred. Sharp teeth snapped and I swore, pushing myself between her and the monster. Or rather, hellhound. I hadn't had the pleasure of dealing with that particular branch of faerie for a while.

I slashed with the blade, catching the creature's nose. Blood spurted at my head in a crimson fountain. Yeuch. The dog hissed between its teeth, shaking droplets onto the thick carpet and staining the white wallpaper.

Goddammit, that'd be a bitch to clean out.

I glanced over my shoulder to find Swanson had opened the front door and he and his wife had fled outside. Normally that'd be the sensible decision, except the wards only covered the house, not the street.

Damn. I backed away, glaring at the creature, goading it to follow me. It did, of course, and I moved my blade in a figure-eight motion to make sure its eyes focused on the sword until we were safely outside. I kept walking backwards, keeping one eye on my feet and the other on the dog.

“Guys,” I said to Swanson out of the corner of my mouth. “Get behind the iron ward. There might be more than one of them.”

I didn’t see if they did as I asked, because the hellhound chose that moment to try to take a bite out of my face. I stepped to the side and stabbed, not holding back any longer. Blood poured from the wound, thick and reddish-blue. Its teeth snapped again, and I ducked, bringing my sword in an arc to sink into its thick neck. Flesh gave way beneath Irene’s silver and crimson blade, and the hellhound fell with a pained squeal—as a second one appeared in the alley at the side of the house, red eyes aglow.

Crap. How many were there? They were rejects from the Wild Hunt, and there might be a thousand of them. They sure as hell didn’t come from this realm. Someone had drawn them here.

That summoning circle.

I had three seconds to make up my mind. Innocent people lived in the other houses here, and there was no option but to run into the nearest alley.

Faces appeared at the windows to stare at me. A camera flashed. The hellhound’s body lay slumped in the middle of the road, and when the second saw its fallen companion, it roared.

I was ready. The alley was wider than I’d expected, easily big enough to accommodate the huge beast, and I drove it backwards with quick slashes.

These creatures were all bite, unless they banded together. In no time, blood spattered the alley, but it kept dodging when I tried to deliver a killing blow.

Right on cue, a third one appeared as if from nowhere, behind the other, like it had popped into existence. But that wasn’t possible.

I blinked, my vision suddenly hazed with blue. They were using some kind of concealment spell. Which meant there might be a dozen hiding here.

And I'd walked right into the middle of the alley.

Oh, shit.

I swung the blade in an arc that sent the hellhound rearing back, then I went for the throat. As it collapsed, two others appeared, surrounded by bluish smoke. They seemed bigger than the first one, and the obvious conclusion slammed into me like a truck.

One hellhound alone wasn't magical, but they were Winter beasts that gained power from death. And I'd killed two of them.

Blue smoke swirled from the body of their dead companion. Each hellhound grew, before my eyes, into beasts so big their huge flanks scraped the alley's sides. But it wasn't their size that froze me.

Every muscle in my body locked into place as a wave of icy fear swept over me. Manufactured fear conjured by magic, but potent enough to still my blade in its tracks.

The hellhounds stalked towards me. I was paralysed like a fish caught in a net, unable to move.

No. Come on—you have faerie magic. Use it.

Easier said than done. My magic only surfaced in life or death situations, and the paralysing wave carried all the power of Winter. But my power came from a darker place. And when the hellhounds got close enough that their warm, foul breath brushed my face, it struck.

Energy surged up my arms, wrapping me in blue tendrils. My grip on the blade tightened as my reflexes went sharp, and suddenly I moved faster than I ever could under normal circumstances. In one movement, I'd leaped impossibly high, and cut the hellhounds' throats in a single, devastating strike.

Two bodies slumped down. I landed on my feet, barely drained. Buzzing, actually. Threads of blue surrounded me like water turned to smoke. Not Summer magic, or Winter. My power came from the place between, where the usual laws didn't apply.

"If there's any more of you, come and fight me," I called into the now empty alleyway.

"I don't think that's necessary."

I froze—not literally this time. The voice was… human. A tall broad-shouldered man followed, wearing a long black coat that stopped at knee-height, short enough not to get in the way, but long enough to leave an impression. He stepped out of the smoke, hardly a hair ruffled by the magic potent in the air.

Oh my god. It was Lord Colton himself—the head of the mages.

"And who are you?" he asked me, eying the bodies of the fallen hellhounds. "A human couldn't possibly have killed those monstrosities."

"Pleasure to meet you, too," I said. I'd never reckoned on meeting the guy face to face, but I like to meet on my own terms. Covered in blood in an alleyway, possibly still glowing with faerie magic… definitely didn't count as my own terms. "I'm here to help the Swanson family deal with magical difficulties."

"The Swanson family," he repeated. "I was under the impression they'd requested assistance from the Mage Lords."

"I was under the impression you didn't give a shit about them," I said, before I could stop myself. Oops. I was still high from the faerie magic, though the buzzing feeling faded by the second.

Confusion flitted across his face before he regarded me with eyes cold as pools of icy water. My heart sank a little. I didn't scare easy, especially where humans were concerned, but the guy had me frozen to the spot.

Possibly because of the giant blade he kept hidden somewhere nearby.

Or maybe the fact that he might kill me if he knew where the magic I'd used had come from.

I drew myself up to my full five-foot-four height—not that it made a difference considering he was at least six-two—and said, "I'm a private investigator the Swansons hired to investigate their son's disappearance.

They came to me after you turned them down."

"Is that so?" The Mage Lord gave me a once-over. "Show me your licence."

"Ask me nicely first." Dammit. I hate being ordered around. Especially by people who don't have any authority over me.

"If you weren't already aware," said the mage, "I am Vance Colton, head of the Mages in this region, and it's required by law for all magical practitioners to come to me for a licence."

"I have a licence," I said, digging in my pocket. "But I'm a consultant and freelancer, not a magical practitioner. I don't work with mages."

"That's unfortunate, because this situation has drawn my attention. It seems there's more to the situation than a simple missing person's case."

"The hellhounds didn't give you a clue?"

I fought back a laugh at the incredulity that crept into Mage Dude's—

Vance Colton's—expression. But all he said was, "Your licence."

Resisting the impulse to roll my eyes, I handed the damn paper over. His eyes roved over it, a crease appearing between his brows.

"Yes, I usually don't have blood in my hair, but the person in the photo is me." I held my hand out pointedly. He handed the licence back, not taking his eyes off me.

“Two witnesses saw you use magic,” he said.

“Witnesses can be mistaken in times of trauma. Can I go now?”

“No,” he said. “You’re to come to my office for an interview.”

“Er, no.” What the hell? “I have a job to do. I’m on this case. And I said I don’t work with mages.”

“You’re a witch, aren’t you? More than a hedge witch, if that stunt proves anything. I just watched you jump ten feet into the air.”

Damn. He must have seen the tail end of the fight. “Yes. It’s a temporary spell for speed and accuracy.”

He had nothing on me. Mages and witches weren’t mortal enemies. More like dogs and cats made to live in the same house. We stayed out of each other’s way, but occasionally, being humans, accidents happened. Mages I’d met were without exception rich aristocrats, presumably because their ancestors had used their skills to their advantage in the old world, banded together and made a fortune. ‘Witch’, however, was a label that applied to any non-mage with a rudimentary magical talent, and no one particular skill. The result was an implied hierarchy. Mages practically owned the town. Witches like Isabel could barely scrape together rent payment. As for half-faeries and shifters, they lived in their own clans under their own rules.

Except when it came down to it, everyone in the region was subject to the mages’ rules. To this man’s rules.

One piece of information to file away for later… the Mage Lord, for all his talents, didn’t have the Sight. He couldn’t see my faerie magic. I mean, I practically glowed blue, even underneath all the blood. A faerie would have spotted me a mile away.

“Then I’d like to interview you. Come to Number Fifteen, Oak Drive.

Clean yourself up first. It’s tiresome getting bloodstains out of the carpet."

I laughed. “You’re not serious.”

He frowned, then his eyes widened as he looked over my shoulder. “Step aside.”

Normally I’d have told him to quit ordering me around, but anything that could startle the Mage Lord, I didn’t want behind me. I spun just in time, and a huge furred body leaped down from the wall.

I jumped back on sheer instinct, raising my sword. The hellhounds’ bodies must have attracted more of them. This one bared its teeth at me, drool flying from its jaw, and I brought my sword up to strike it.

The dog blurred and reappeared some five feet away. Mage Dude stepped to my side so we blocked the alleyway. The hellhound snarled at us, knowing it was outnumbered.

Of course, that’s when the second one appeared.

Dammit. I didn’t dare push my luck with faerie magic this time, but with those corpses stinking up the alleyway, any of the hellhounds could draw power again. I needed to finish this fast.

Climbing onto one of the fallen bodies to better reach my target, I stabbed its leg then went for the neck. The hellhound roared and flailed, and my sword remained stuck in its neck. Power thrummed through its huge body, almost shaking me off.

“Watch out! They get stronger the more of them you kill,” I yelled at the mage—he might be a dick, but I didn’t want to watch him get his throat torn out. I stabbed the one bearing down on me and the hellhound slumped. I’d forgotten I was using its body for balance and fell to the alley floor, landing at a crouch that made my legs protest at the impact. I looked up to see the second leap at my face.

And then the mage was suddenly in front of me. The giant sword appeared again—if I hadn’t moved, the blade would have sliced my head off. He moved *fast.* And—holy shit. For a moment, I gaped as what looked like black scales slid down his hands, encasing them around the sword’s hilt.

He wasn’t only a highly adept mage and swordsman. The guy must be part shifter, too.

A snarl sounded and several more shapes bolted towards us. The blade flashed out and two dogs fell even though the sword was nowhere near

them. *Huh?* I’d have stared, but another dog’s jaws snapped inches from my head. I stabbed it, this time getting the throat. Blood poured from the crimson slash, and it sank, the blue tendrils of magic fading away like wisps of smoke blown away on the breeze.

The mage had made short work of the others, in the time it took me to blink. How had he killed them from way over here? I was definitely going to have to revise the assumption that mages talked a bigger game than they showed, because holy crap.

“Jesus.” I gaped at him, unable to help it. “What the hell kind of power is that?”

The Mage Lord paused to survey the alley. “I’ll put a call through to the clean-up crew.” He spoke like he was doing me a favour. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” Okay, maybe he was only ninety-nine percent asshole. “How’d you do that?”

“I take it you’re reconsidering my offer?” He cleaned the blade on a handkerchief I swore he’d conjured up from thin air. From his casual manner, you’d hardly know he’d just flayed a bunch of hellhounds. And could apparently defy the laws of reality.

“No,” I said. “I said I don’t work with mages, and I meant it. Thank you for your assistance.”

He raised an eyebrow, but I turned away. I needed to check on the Swansons and make sure every piece of magical equipment in their son’s room was deactivated. Preferably without the guy behind me getting involved. He’d probably have them arrested for owning that dodgy necromancy gear.

The Swansons hadn’t gone back into the house, but cowered on the doorstep behind the iron ward’s edge.

“Ivy?” Swanson’s face was greyish pale, and his eyes lingered on my bloodstained clothes and hair. I swallowed hard, wanting to gag as the decaying stench of Faerie filtered its way into my nostrils now the buzz from the magic died down.

“I’m fine,” I said. “We need to clear all faerie blood from this place and get rid of everything in your son’s room before we progress further. I wouldn’t put it past that changeling to have set up more traps. The mages

are here, too, and there’s no way to prove you weren’t responsible for those illegal spells upstairs.”

The Swansons wordlessly moved aside to let me past. I’d freaked them out, but probably for the best. Most people, when it came down to it, would rather know the truth. I know I would.

I managed to clean the blood from the wall using a cleansing spell and pack the worst of the magical equipment in my pockets without the head of the mages showing up again. Maybe he’d gone back to fetch some of his companions to help clean up. Leaving evidence lying around right near his own territory made a terrible impression. And he didn’t know where the hellhounds came from, of course. I doubted he knew one faerie species from another.

It’s required all magical practitioners come to me for a licence. Er, no.

Most witches didn’t have licences. And I was one, for all he knew.

The doorbell rang as I was on the way downstairs.

“Crap,” I said. “Er… answer it if you want, but do you have a back door?”

Swanson gave me a confused nod. “Yes. Who is it?”

“The head of the mages. He’s been hounding me, and I’d rather he not see me carrying this.” I indicated my backpack, in which I’d stashed all the

dodgy spell gear from upstairs. Unfortunately, since I'd used the only cleansing spell I had on the hallway, I still had blood all over me. Catching the bus home was out of the question.

Mrs Swanson showed me to the other door through the dimly lit kitchen.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll be back tomorrow, once I've done some investigating. It's better the Mage Lord doesn't know I'm here."

I heard voices in the hall. It was him, all right. I apologised to Mrs Swanson for the trouble and quickly left, running through the garden to vault over the fence at the far end. I'd have to take a roundabout route home, but walking in public covered in faerie blood would draw the kind of attention I wanted to avoid. I'd had enough of faeries already.

So somebody had set up a hellhound summoning spell. Someone who knew the Swansons would hire a magical practitioner to help. But what did

that have to do with their son? And the changeling? It couldn't be from Winter, like the hellhounds originally were.

No. It looked like my worst fears were right on the mark.

The grey area between the realms was a lawless place governed by power and fear combined. The lords with power commanded anyone they could persuade to serve them through fear and coercion—but most of them wanted nothing to do with humans. We were helpless apes in comparison to the powerful immortals that lived over on the other side. Only in the invasion, when the doors to Faerie had temporarily opened, had they decided to come out and play.

And they'd taken everything away from me.

CHAPTER FIVE

One restless night later, I woke to the sound of pounding on the door. Not my bedroom door, but the flat's. Swanson? No. He wouldn't be angry enough to try to break the door down. Surely. I slid out of bed as another knock shook the house.

"What the hell?" said Isabel sleepily from behind her bedroom door. If she was half asleep, it must be early. I checked the time. Six in the morning.

"What the hell indeed." I had my suspicions. Okay, three guesses. One: the landlord. Two: Larsen. Three…

I opened the door to find Lord Colton stood outside. As usual, he wore a fitted suit and his ridiculously long coat.

"Do you wear that thing in the summer?" I asked, acutely aware I'd only had the chance to shove a dressing gown over the shorts and T-shirt I wore as pyjamas. He hardly seemed to notice, however—his cool, grey eyes met my gaze.

“Ivy Lane, I’m retracting my offer of an interview and turning it into an order.”

I almost laughed in his face. “I don’t take orders. Freelancer here. I pick and choose my clients.” And my working hours. Six am was as uncivilised

as you could get.

“Swanson tells me he came here to speak to you, and then he hired you to help him find his daughter. You then went over to his house yesterday and attempted to use a witch’s tracker. You failed, and instead those faerie creatures appeared.”

“Yes…” Damn, he was thorough. And persistent. Not good. Just what I didn’t need right now.

“I’d like to make you an offer. The mages can be of assistance in this case.”

This time, I did laugh. He couldn’t sound more pretentious if he tried.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I work alone.”

Lord Colton blinked. “You won’t consider a partnership? Look at the resources I have at my disposal. I can command every mage in the district.”

“Yeah, no. Not interested. This isn’t something you can help with.”

Annoyance flashed in his eyes. “That wasn’t a request. You will partner with the mages, and with me, or you’ll lose this case.” His tone took on a steely edge that would have made me step back if I wasn’t pissed off. Who the hell did he think he was?

Only the most powerful human magic user in the city.

I glared. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Why would I work with you?” I put every ounce of derision possible into my tone. I didn’t care if he was practically royalty. He couldn’t order me around in my own house.

For a heartbeat, I expected him to wave a hand and make me explode into a heap of bloody entrails the way I'd seen another mage take care of a trespasser a few years ago. Instead, his forehead creased in a frown, like he genuinely couldn't fathom why I wasn't kneeling at his feet.

"Why wouldn't you? You'll have every—"

"Every mage in the city. I get it. Look, I'm sure you have a grand plan, but it won't work. I know what I'm doing."

"Was almost being mauled to death by faerie dogs part of the plan?" he queried.

Oh, he had a sarcastic streak, did he?

"We hit a snag yesterday."

"Your changeling got away, I'm told."

"As I said, we hit a snag." What the hell did I have to do to get rid of this guy? I was kind of tempted to engage one of Isabel's trespasser spells, but pissing off the head of the mages wasn't a wise move.

Then again, neither was working with him. I didn't need every mage in the district to know who I was. No thanks. I got by without anonymity because nobody who knew me before the invasion was still alive. A hell of a depressing way to get a new start in life. However, some of the faeries might still know my name.

The Mage Lord took one step towards me so we were practically face to face. Or rather, face to chest. He looked even taller than usual, mostly thanks to the coat, but also because of the breeze that had kicked up behind him, threatening to make me step back into the hallway. Power pretty much radiated from him. But I'd stared down too many of Faerie's worst nightmare creatures to flinch away from an arrogant human.

"You're to come to my office before nightfall for a meeting, or you'll be formally charged with obstructing an investigation."

My jaw unhinged. “You what?”

He stepped down the doorstep onto the path. “Think on it, Ivy Lane.”

And just like that, he was gone.

Holy shit. He’d killed any chance I had of going this alone. Never mind my resolution not to piss him off—I’d done so, and then some. I’d never heard of the mages threatening anyone before. No one who didn’t deserve it, anyway. All I’d done was take a job he’d turned down in the first place.

Maybe the mages *could* help, though they had no experience with faeries beyond the superficial everyday stuff. Trolls in the sewers and piskies in the attic—normal. Kidnapping… not so much. Especially as faeries had one place they wanted to get to—their own realm. As for those hellhounds, he might have been fast enough to kill them, but even a mage couldn’t stand up to the most powerful of Faerie’s creatures.

“The fucking cheek,” I muttered, turning my back on the door and staring into the dingy hallway.

“What is it?” Isabel appeared from the flat, her hair sticking up from sleep. She wore a lacy top and a flowery skirt, but not her charms.

“Mages,” I said. “Head mage showed up here and practically bullied me into working with him. He thinks he has the right to this case.”

“What a dick,” she commented. “Wait. You insulted the Mage Lord?”

“He insulted me first,” I said.

Isabel grinned at me, though worry lingered in her expression. “Are you still going over to Swanson’s today?”

“Hell, yes. I’m not about to let His Highness steal my job from under my nose.”

“You told him you were a witch, right?”

“I had to. He saw me use magic against the hellhounds.”

“Shit.”

“I know, right?” I shook my head, walking back into the flat. Of all the people to interfere. The mages didn’t usually pay much attention to anyone outside of their elite circle. As for me, nobody would take me for a magic user if they didn’t see me in action. But he’d seen me do more than fight.

He’d seen me turn the faeries’ magic against them. If he poked around and asked another witch if what I’d done was possible, he’d get a ‘hell, no’. And then I’d be in trouble.

Sighing, I went into my room to dress properly and get my head together.

I did need to talk to Swanson again. I’d dropped off all the dodgy spell equipment at clean-up last night, earning raised eyebrows from Larsen. I’d told him I’d caught a bunch of teenagers staging an exorcism, but he didn’t buy it.

Larsen could wait. I found the latest tracking spell set up in the living room, beside the bottle containing the changeling’s blood I’d taken from the scene yesterday. I was probably tempting fate by leaving it here, but the container was sealed. Like hell would I hand it over to Larsen. He didn’t have a clue just how dangerous the blood of one of the faeries could be, in the wrong hands.

I’d need to set up the spell somewhere outside, as far away from here as possible. But where…?

“Ivy!” shouted a voice. Erwin the piskie flew past, blowing a raspberry at me. “You stink of hellhound.”

Still? I’d scrubbed myself raw in the shower yesterday.

“Job hazards,” I said. “You haven’t seen a changeling around, have you?”

The piskie flew into the lampshade, shrieking as the heat burned his skin.

I rolled my eyes. The creature had the sense of a moth.

“No bad faeries.”

“Good,” I said. The changeling had fled miles from here, but sometimes I felt like I had ‘faerie bait’ tattooed on my forehead. Still, I’d find an isolated area before I attempted to track down the changeling. Preferably without the Mage Lord getting involved.

“I have better news,” said Isabel. “There are cookies left over from yesterday.”

My head snapped up. “Brilliant.” Actually, my mood improved a hundred percent. Isabel’s cookies were delicious, stress-relieving, and calorie free.

Now *that* was witchcraft.

Naturally, the doorbell rang before I reached the kitchen.

Isabel went to answer it. I followed, just in case the mage had come back.

I didn’t want him threatening my friends.

“Ivy Lane.” Larsen glared at me from the doorstep. “What’s this?”

He held up the defunct spell I’d brought in from the Swansons’ house. As usual, he wore jeans and a dirty T-shirt, and smelled strongly of cheap beer.

I moved past Isabel to stare him down.

“A spell,” I said.

“It’s death magic.” He threw it in my face. “We don’t deal with necromancers here.”

I caught the spell on reflex. “Neither do I. That’s why I was getting rid of it. There were teenagers—”

“Can anyone confirm that?” He moved close so his stinking breath wafted in my face. “You’ve been defying my rules for too long. If you’ve been consorting with death mages, you won’t be welcome in my office any longer.”

Where the hell did that come from?

“I don’t have anything to do with the necromancers. Ugh.”

The surly old bastard narrowed his eyes at me. He was part shifter and always claimed he could sniff out lies, but he couldn’t change forms and

hadn’t so much as a drop of magical talent. He hated the mages, so there was absolutely no way I’d tell him about the Mage Lord.

“Get rid of that spell,” said Larsen. “And if you bring anything like that near my office again, you’re fired.”

Whoa. He walked away, leaving Isabel gawping at me.

“I’ll have to stick a notice to the door where people can add their names to the ‘Threaten Ivy’ list while I’m at the mages’ place,” I said, staring after him. “Damn.”

“What, you’re actually going to the Mage Lord?” Isabel tugged her hair loose from her ponytail as I closed the door.

“What do you take me for? This case is mine. The guy’s a dick, and he’s not taking my job from me.”

“What’s going on?” Henry Cavanaugh peered from the top of the stairs to the upper flat. He was a wolf shifter, so he’d probably sensed Larsen coming. He and his wife were friendly enough, if a little too willing to let their four-year-old son get too close to my spells. On cue, little George ran downstairs and threw his arms around me. Apparently *he* didn’t think I smelled like hellhound. “What’s that?”

Oh, crap. I held the dead summoning spell out of reach. “Nothing.”

Isabel, realising my dilemma, took the spell from me. “I’ll ask the coven to get rid of it. What was Larsen’s problem?”

“Hell if I know. Thanks, by the way.” I tilted my head to look at Henry, who came downstairs. “You haven’t seen any faeries around here, have you?”

Call me paranoid, but I needed to check nothing had followed me home.

“No. Didn’t you bash a troll’s head in the other day?” he asked, taking George’s hand and leading him away from me.

“Rumours,” I said. “I just knocked it out.”

“Come in,” said Isabel. “I made cookies. Henry, do you want some?”

I led the way into the flat and helped myself to Isabel’s glorious cookies.

They tasted like cinnamon and divine goodness, and made me think today wasn’t a complete wreck after all.

Henry frowned and sniffed at the ceiling. “Has another shifter been here?”

I hesitated. “No.” Not strictly a lie. I didn’t want the whole world to know the Mage Lord had taken an interest in me.

Isabel’s eyes were sharp, but she refrained from speaking. Henry’s wolf senses were rarely wrong. And from the flare of his nostrils and the tension in his shoulders, he smelled trouble.

The Mage Lord practically defined ‘trouble’. But if I refused to go to him, I’d lose my job. Trapped on all sides. I took another cookie as casually as I dared, listening to George’s babbling about his new friends. Shifter kids played much nicer with others than the mages or necromancers—and considerably more so than half-faeries. Considering shifters turned into hairy or scaly monsters on a monthly basis, the Cavanaugh family had their lives together a damn sight better than I did.

“Can you always smell when another shifter’s been nearby?” asked Isabel. “How far out?”

“Only within the town’s limit, usually,” said Henry, taking a delicate bite of the cookie. “The Ley Line interferes otherwise. Goes right through the centre of our territory.”

Isabel nodded. “Yeah, it does.” Witches’ powers were amplified by the energies swirling around the line. Getting close made spells go haywire, but most magic users, aside from mages, couldn’t use their powers away from it.

The line used to be invisible. Until the faeries used it as a conduit to open a gate into our world, permanently bringing magic into the spotlight. I didn’t go near it if I could help myself, but maybe the witches living along the line had sensed something screwy when the changeling showed up. If anywhere contained enough energy to summon up a changeling, the Ley Line did. Then again, the Swansons’ house was nowhere near there.

George tugged at my hand. “You look sad,” he said. “Have another cookie.”

I loved that kid. “Sure,” I said, taking one. “Just thinking about the job I’m working on. Looking for someone,” I added vaguely to Henry. “It’s to do with the faeries.”

On cue, Erwin flew through the room with a squeal.

“I thought I smelled one of them,” said Henry. “It’s not as distinctive as a shifter’s scent. Are you *certain* one didn’t come here? The whole doorway smells like… power.”

Power had a smell? I supposed, to shifters, it did. And now Isabel stared openly at me.

“Not that I know of.” I shrugged. “You and Susie are the only shifters I know. Can you sense which type of shifter it is by scent?”

Henry took a deep breath, inhaling. “A powerful one. A rare kind of power. I should go.”

What? “Huh? There’s nobody here. What kind of power?”

“The type at the top of the shifter chain,” he said. “They’re rare enough not to form their own packs. Tend to be loners. Predators.”

I thought of the Mage Lord. *I can see that.*

Not all shifters banded together. When they’d hidden from the world, they’d once lived in packs, isolated from society, but like witch blood, shifter blood had been diluted enough that a significant portion of the population carried the gene without even knowing it.

The image of those black scales and claws flashed through my head. The Mage Lord clearly didn’t care who saw what he was. That made him the stark opposite of every shifter I knew.

“I’m heading out anyway.” I needed to put the changeling’s blood to good use, and I wasn’t about to try any experiments with little kids nearby.

First, I had a mage—or shifter—to get off my back.

CHAPTER SIX

Here we go. I looked up at the headquarters of the mages, an imposing manor-like building with whitewashed walls gleaming in the weak sunlight.

Its balconies, endless windows and extensive gardens belonged to a time before the faeries, but the elaborate wards set up around its perimeter told me the mages took their security seriously. *Seriously enough to keep riffraff like me out.*

Last time I'd been here had been ten years ago—the day I'd crawled out of Faerie with the lord's blood still drying on my hands. After wandering around the streets in numb horror and confusion for a few hours, I'd overheard a bunch of sharply-dressed men talking about the faeries.

In this strange new world, faeries seemed to be a given. Piskies fluttered around in packs, sylphs waved from the few trees at the roadside, and nymphs lurked beneath the rivers' surfaces, eyes glittering. I couldn't connect this surreal new world with the one I'd left behind. Before, this road had been lined with cars. A single black car with tinted windows was all that remained. Like everyone had vanished.

I'd run after the men in suits when I heard the word *Sidhe.* I wore nothing but a ragged dress one of the other captives had given me when a bunch of crazed fire imps had burned my clothes off. I still remembered the

harshness of the sun burning the back of my neck and arms. I'd been under shade for so long, everything had looked like a mirage. Including the manor the men walked up to. I'd never given it a second glance before, but in that moment, it looked like a sanctuary.

One of them had turned back and saw me. Like the others, he wore a smart suit, his hair crisply parted to the side. "Who are you?" he'd asked.

My throat dry, I croaked out, "Ivy. Please, you have to help me. I don't know where I am."

"You're at the headquarters of the Mage Lords," said the man. "What are you, a witchling? What's with the blood? Who'd you kill?"

The words had stuck in my throat. *A faerie lord. I killed a faerie lord, and I escaped.* "Nobody, I just want to go home. Do you—do you have a telephone I can use?"

"We're not a charity." As the others disappeared into the hallway, he'd watched, like he expected me to leave. Like he wanted me to.

My heart sank into my feet. "Where am I?" I whispered again.

Mortal time passes in a flicker of infinity, I'd heard in the faerie world.

How long might have passed? Were my family—?

The man had watched me, his expression a mixture of distaste and wariness. "No witches allowed in here."

"I'm not a witch," I said. "I don't know where I am. I—when did the faeries come?"

No. No. No.

“Ten years ago.”

No.

That’s when I’d dropped to my knees and screamed. And kept screaming, sure people would come running and help.

Nobody did. The mages had retreated into the townhouse and closed the door on my screams, leaving me alone, burning on the outside, icy cold on the inside, with faerie blood on my hands.

Ten years. Only three had passed for me. My family was dead. The changeling who’d replaced me was missing. And I’d had nothing left.

Another ten years later and the manor looked exactly the same. Trimmed hedges lined the path, and the usual wrought-iron fence kept out any intruders who weren’t put off by all the glowing wards. I hovered outside, not seeing any way to knock. Did I have to stand here until someone came to find me?

A man appeared from the shadows, quiet as a ghost. He hardly looked older than twenty, his smile disconcertingly inhuman. Nobody I knew had teeth that perfectly even and white. His smooth dark hair flowed to shoulder length, his eyes like ice blue chips. Nobody I knew had eyes that unnatural bright shade, either, unless he wore contacts.

“Your licence?”

“Back off, faerie.” Did the mages employ faerie guards? I’d thought they had nothing to do with the Sidhe. But this guy sure as hell wasn’t pure human.

The dazzling smile disappeared as his jaw tensed. “I’m no faerie. Give me your licence.”

“I have an invitation from your leader, the *esteemed* Lord Colton,” I said.

“And believe me, I don’t want to be here.”

“Then leave,” he said. “Don’t talk about my boss that way.”

“I’ve been ordered to come here,” I said, standing my ground. No magic surrounded him, but he was definitely fey. I moved so he could see the sword at my waist.

Suddenly, a knife was in his hand. “Back off, witch,” he said.

I stepped towards him. “Try me, faerie.”

“I’m not—”

“What is going on here?” Vance Colton appeared behind the gate, which creaked open as though he’d given it a verbal command. He didn’t wear the long coat this time, but a tailored shirt and trousers. “Ralph, step aside.”

The faerie boy shot me one final glare and moved behind me to stand guard at the gate’s side.

“Ivy,” said Lord Colton. “I hoped you’d see sense.”

I gritted my teeth to stop myself digging a deeper hole, and followed him through the gates.

“Your pretty faerie guard pulled a knife on me.” This place was even more upper-class than I remembered, with elaborate hedge cuttings in the shapes of animals and even a tinkling fountain in the middle of the immaculate lawn. Curling magical glyphs decorated the walls. Mages didn’t need runes to cast spells or even set up wards. The decorations were for show, like everything else.

“Faerie?” Lord Colton frowned at me over his shoulder. “If you mean Ralph, don’t say that to his face. You aren’t scaring away my assistants, are you?”

“If they’re running scared from me, there’s something wrong with your system.”

“There’s no reason to be so hostile,” he said, walking to the doorstep.

“I’m offering you a favour.”

“By threatening to take away my livelihood.” Like I’d let him play word games with me now. “I took on the case first. You turned it down.”

“Before I knew magic was involved.” He pushed the door open and beckoned me into the hallway.

“Faeries,” I corrected. “I’ll bet you don’t know the difference between a boggart and a brownie.” I hesitated before following. The manor repelled me. But what choice did I have?

“If you’re an expert, tell me the name of the species that attacked us yesterday,” he said. I couldn’t see anything ominous behind him, so I walked into the thickly carpeted hall.

“Hellhounds,” I said. “Faerie dogs.”

He gave a brief nod that might have meant approval coming from anyone else, and led the way down the hall. “I wasn’t aware witches were experts on faeries.”

If he was trying to probe me for information, I wouldn’t fall for the ruse.

We reached an office panelled in cherry wood, and he moved behind a desk.

Sunlight filtered through the drapes onto the smart bookcases and filing cabinets. A typical office. Mundane.

“So the rumours weren’t true,” I said. At least, there didn’t seem to be any troll heads anywhere so far.

“Rumours?”

“The shifters say you keep the heads of the trolls you’ve killed hanging on the walls. Unless they’re in a hidden room somewhere. Like the Bluebeard story.”

Could I picture him butchering people and storing them in cupboards?

Maybe. After what Henry had said, that the aura of a supremely powerful shifter was almost overpowering, I'd kind of expected to sense it myself.

However, though the Mage Lord's personality might be grating, I didn't get the scary vibe I'd had before. Standing before him like this made me remember being called to the head teacher's office at school for a minor incident. More annoying than scary.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Really? That's a new one." The corner of his mouth twitched.

"It wouldn't surprise me if you did. If you're about to pull out that weapon of yours and decapitate me, I'd like to be forewarned."

"You think I'm going to kill you?"

I considered this. "No, but I'd be ready if you tried."

He laughed this time. "I hate to disappoint you. I had no idea my reputation was so dire."

Had to be a lie, right? Too bad he, unlike faeries, could lie whenever the hell he wanted. "The first time I saw you, you were threatening someone with a sword because they wanted you to find their missing kid."

His smile faded. "You were there? In the Singing Banshee?"

Oh crap. "Yes." No point in hiding it.

"Every hour, about thirty people show up here trying to convince me to use magic to solve their problems," said Lord Colton. "If I accepted all those cases, I'd have no time to keep the city safe. As for Swanson, his teenage son has run away five times before, with no magical involvement."

"So you scared him into running straight to me."

"Clearly," he said. "Does that answer your questions? As for the rumours, you carry a reputation of your own. You single-handedly knocked out a bridge troll two days ago, didn't you?"

Shit. *Don't tell me he's called my boss*. I'd never hear the end of it if he had. "Yes. Now, can you tell me why you felt the need to threaten my livelihood? I've accepted this case already."

"You aren't registered as a magical practitioner, for a start. This case may require spellwork to solve."

"I live with the second most powerful witch in the local coven," I said.

"She's doing the spellwork. I do the investigating."

"How long have you been working as a consultant?"

"Five years," I said. "Longer than you've been in this position, I'm told.

I've solved over a dozen missing child cases."

"Changelings?"

Goddammit. I glared at him to cover up the creeping sensation that crawled down my spine at the very mention of the word. The one changeling case I'd been involved in, I'd been the victim, and nobody had solved the crime.

"No," I said. "But I've dealt with faeries before."

"Your full name's Ivy Lane, right?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Before I form an agreement with somebody, I need to know certain information."

"Who said anything about an agreement?"

"Larsen. He's your employer, so I had to obtain permission from him to work with you."

"The treacherous bastard," I muttered. Figured he'd been behind this.

That’d explain why he was so pissed with me earlier, too. He hated the mages, though he’d never turn down an offer from their leader. I wondered if the Mage Lord had pulled the uber-scary act on *him.*

Actually, I wouldn’t mind seeing that.

“He’s your boss, isn’t he?” asked Lord Colton. “He told me you’ve worked for him for ten years, since you were sixteen. That’s awfully young to be a killer.”

“It’s the legal working age, isn’t it?” I’d become a killer because I’d had no choice. I didn’t want him to know about my money issues. “You might have noticed we live in a dangerous world.”

“Fair point.” He looked me up and down, though I couldn’t for the life of me figure out what he was assessing me for this time. “You’re certainly

qualified for this job, but it’s required by law for the Mage Lords to intervene if magic is involved in any capacity.”

“Fine,” I said, through gritted teeth. “I get the compensation from Swanson. He offered the job to me first.”

“That seems adequate,” he said. “I should warn you, however, that if I think you’re endangering anyone—particularly using magic—I have licence to take any props you own away from you.”

I gaped at him for a moment. Probably, I should have laughed—it was physically impossible for him to remove the magic from me. He assumed I was using hedge witch tricks. Thank god mages thought witches beneath them, because at least then he wouldn’t poke further.

Or would he? If he found out the truth… maybe he’d lock me up in jail.

Or a lab. Neither seemed an appealing option.

He looked at me expectantly. I scrambled for a reply. “That seems adequate.”

His eyes glittered with something like amusement. “This is going to be interesting.”

Cocky bastard. “You got your wish. Now you’d better follow through on your end of the bargain. I need the money. I’ll bet *you* don’t.” I looked pointedly at the chair’s fancy furnishings, the embossed bookcases—hell, everything in the room stank of money and privilege. I felt like a gnome at a house party in my tattered jeans and top with one too many holes in the sleeves.

I made myself stand taller. “Believe it or not, I’m good at my job,” I told him. “But I’m not your employee. You can’t order me around or make me play by your rules.”

“That remains to be seen,” he said. “Your skills. Tell me about them.”

“You don’t get my life story,” I said. “You just get my expertise.” I was bluffing… kind of. I’m a walking survival story, not a war hero. But he didn’t have to know. “I can use any spell. I specialise in tracking.”

“Anyone can buy a tracking spell from the market.”

“And half of them are duds. My flatmate and I make them from scratch.

And I’m good at killing things.”

His gaze dropped to my jacket, which bore the bloodstains from yesterday. “Evidently.”

“Faeries,” I elaborated. “I’m good at killing faeries. And I’d say whoever set up the hellhound trap is in need of a friendly chat with my blade.”

Lord Colton’s mouth twisted into a smirk. “Well, if you’re so certain,” he said, “let’s begin.”

Let’s begin. Right. Talk about dramatic. I almost returned his smirk, but I’d pushed my luck by mocking him already. “Fine,” I said. “As you’ve probably gathered, my last attempt to find the changeling triggered a trap

and set those hellhounds loose. The Swansons' house is clear, but I'd rather use the tracking spells in an uninhabited area, just in case."

"The changeling," he said. "What does it look like?"

"I don't know." He gave me a condescending look, like he was any kind of expert. "Changelings are shapeshifter faeries," I explained. "They're by and large vicious and stupid. That's how they get coerced or persuaded into impersonating humans. But it's their masters you want to watch out for."

Except those spells set up in the Swansons' son's room didn't look like the work of an idiot. No, it was calculated. By whom, I couldn't say.

"Masters," said Lord Colton. "The kidnappers. Fey?"

"Without exception," I said. "They wouldn't be working with humans."

"I thought not," said Lord Colton.

A likely story. "Sure you didn't," I said. "Want to come and hold the spell while I lure out a changeling?"

"Hold the spell?"

I gave him my most charming smile. "It's nice to have an assistant sometimes."

"Assistant?"

"You don't have to repeat every word I say, Sir."

His eyes narrowed and he grunted. "I'm starting to doubt your expertise."

"More like starting to regret tying me down," I said. "I work better alone.

This is the best you're going to get."

"Fine," he said. "I'm putting a call through to the other Mage Lords, letting them know there might be rogue faeries loose in the city."

I bristled. “I can handle—”

He’d already pulled a phone from his pocket. I moved towards the door, fidgeting. I wanted out of here. Did he have to inform his underlings whenever he went anywhere?

The Mage Lord gave a few incomprehensible orders, then hung up the phone. “That’s taken care of. We have backup on standby.”

“Oh, good,” I said. “Nice to know you have faith in me.”

“Do you frequently walk out with no backup?”

“You’re the backup.” I hitched my smile back into place. “I did say I could do my job.”

His brows rose. Probably, it had been a while since anyone stood up to him. Well, he was head of the Mage Lords, and as far as I could tell, that meant loaded, arrogant, and surrounded by fawning admirers. Okay, I hadn’t seen much in the way of the latter… yet.

“We’re partners,” he said. “That makes it *our* job, not just yours. The other Lords can step in and intervene if need be.”

“You won’t need to.” Sure, if shit really hit the fan, we’d probably need as much help as we could get—but I didn’t need all the mages figuring out my ties to the faeries. As long as Lord Colton proved more of a help than a hindrance, I’d let him in on this. If not, I’d take off on my own, as I always did.

“You seem certain,” he commented. “The reserve team consists of two fire mages, one frost mage, two kinetics and an empath. Would your skills be sufficient enough to make up for that?”

Damn him for trying to goad me into confiding the extent of my abilities.

I glared at him instead.

“Depends if *your* skills are up to scratch.”

The mage bared his teeth in a grin. “*My* skills are more than sufficient, I think you’ll find.” His tone slid over me, unexpectedly seductive, and sent my thoughts right into the gutter. I fought to keep from blushing. The gleam in his eye told me he knew exactly the effect he’d had.

What in the hell was the matter with me? Ever since my… *bad experiences* with faeries, I’d developed an aversion to males who fell into the category of ‘pretty’ or showed any signs they might have faerie blood.

This guy, though…‘pretty’ was not a word I’d use to describe him. Unless in the phrase, ‘pretty scarily attractive.’

Nope. *Not* going there. I shut the thoughts down and gave him a Look.

“We’ll see about that.”

I marched ahead down the corridor, and I swore I heard him laughing at me as he locked his office.

What have I got myself into?

CHAPTER SEVEN

I called Swanson as we left the Mage Lords' house to let him know we were tracking the changeling. I didn't say where. I'd rather avoid him getting involved in this any further. He'd had a damn close call, and the idea that the hellhounds had attacked him at home made me certain the faeries weren't done with his family yet. It'd be downright irresponsible to perform the tracking spell there.

Unfortunately, I couldn't go to one of my usual haunts, because of the obvious presence of the Mage Lord, who walked down the drab streets like he expected red carpets to unfurl themselves before him. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. His black coat made him stick out like a troll amongst humans, only with considerably more visual appeal. I'd planned to go behind the scenes, but then again, the faeries might think twice about attacking me when they saw him. As much as I hated to admit it.

Though he didn't appear to have any weapons on him, his coat's deep pockets might hide anything. More than that, though—his whole manner radiated power. Even without the sword. He moved like a guy who could deck you with one punch, and projected an aura of absolute confidence that

made me feel like a kid stumbling on her first day at school. I kept my head high, refusing point-blank to give ground. Equals or not, the job was *mine.*

“Whereabouts did you plan to perform the spell?” he asked.

“Preferably as far from anywhere inhabited as possible.” But also within a fair distance of the Ley Line, otherwise the spell wouldn’t work at all. This was a large part of the reason few people left the town—it was Supernatural Central, no matter how many people had died here in the invasion. Made it difficult to use spells without drawing attention, too, because the line amplified everyone’s magic. Everyone but the mages, who had their own internal power sources.

Lord Colton indicated one of the nondescript black cars parked near the manor. “I can drive us.”

I snorted. “Yeah, if I wanted to advertise myself, I’d have you conjure fire and lightning over my head. Trust me, the faeries are smart. If they see the pair of us zooming around in one of your cars, we won’t have a hope in hell of catching up to the changeling. Those little bastards move fast.”

“Very well,” he said, surprising me. “What, pray tell, is your exact plan?”

“I track the changeling, then set up a trap to lure it in.” Okay, it sounded better in my head.

“A trap.” Scepticism tinged his voice. “I thought you knew all about the faeries. Does that include changelings?”

I looked away, annoyed at the way my skin grew cold and my chest tightened at the mention of the word.

“I know of them. Like I said, they’re shapeshifters, so I’ll try using the method I’d use on a different shapeshifting fey first. Then I have alternatives.”

“I take it the changeling was the one who set a trap yesterday?” I felt his gaze boring into me. He knew I’d covered up, somehow—I was sure of it.

Hell, maybe Larsen had told him about me showing up at the office with necromantic equipment. Swanson, thankfully, had disposed of the dead rats himself.

“Yes,” I said, not elaborating. If he knew the truth, why was he questioning me? Necromancy was closer to mage magic than faeries’ was.

The only reason the mages didn’t associate with necromancers was that half of them were too creeped out by the idea of animating corpses to want to

share an office. Like mages, necromancers had one skill only, except theirs edged towards the dark and creepy end of the supernatural spectrum.

The Mage Lord continued to watch me as we walked out of the suburban area occupied by houses belonging to the mages, and into a more unsavoury neighbourhood with broken-down buildings on either side.

I turned to him. “What?”

“Where’d a witch learn about the faeries? I asked all my contacts for information and most of them don’t even know what a changeling is.”

“Clearly nobody reads faerie stories anymore.” Though considering most people nowadays had *lived* one, if they were born before the invasion, I could forgive that.

“Hmm.” He didn’t believe me. He seemed the type who saw through most deception. Exactly what I least needed.

I shrugged, rearranging my hair, casual as you like. “I have a loud-mouthed talking piskie living in my flat. You pick up a few things.”

“Really.” He framed the word more like an incredulous statement than a question.

“Yes.” He wouldn’t get any more answers from me if I could help it. “Any ideas where I can cast the spell? I don’t want to draw any more faeries to the Swansons’ house. We need to get the changeling’s location first.”

“I have a field set aside for spellwork.”

“You own a field?” It wouldn’t have surprised me by this point.

“The mage council does.” He led the way down a side street which ended at an old car park. Beyond were several dilapidated buildings and what looked like a football pitch. This part of town must have been abandoned after the invasion, though I didn’t see any obvious marks left by the war.

Not more than shattered windows and overgrown gardens, anyway. Maybe everyone who’d lived here had been evacuated as a precaution. It was close enough to mage territory to make me pause and wonder if they hadn’t suffered losses in the invasion, too. I’d never asked one about it, for obvious reasons.

I shoved my own memories away and concentrated on not slipping in the mud stirred up around the field from the recent rain. Lord Colton strode up the slope without so much as getting his fancy shoes stuck in the mud.

Actually, his shoes appeared to have been doctored with some kind of mud-repelling spell, because they remained black and shiny even as we reached the field. Jesus. Talk about over-preparing.

I definitely wasn’t jealous by the time I’d pulled my boot from the sticky mud for the tenth time, nor when mud splattered the already stained legs of my jeans. They were barely washed-out blue by this point, and probably held together by sheer willpower. I yanked my boot free from the mud and glared at the Mage Lord when he turned around, presumably to see what was taking me so long. I kept my gaze on the old field instead.

The scorched remains of spell circles marked the dead grass. A faint burning smell lingered in the air, tickling my nostrils, but it was the aftermath of witch magic, not faerie.

I found a free spot and set up my own spell while Lord Colton watched. I hadn’t reckoned on him witnessing this, and it came as no surprise when he raised an eyebrow at the small container of blood in my hand.

“What’s that for?”

“The changeling’s blood.” I’d been scared to death of spilling it, actually, but this seemed the safest way to be rid of the stuff. I could hardly believe the changeling had left it lying around the Swansons’ house. “It was all I could get. Blood’s the most accurate method of using a tracking spell.”

He grunted, looking displeased. The mages didn’t deal in blood magic, for some reason. Maybe because necromancers did. I leaned over the faintly outlined circle and sprinkled the blood onto the cracked soil, then dropped the container in after it. Every trace would be gone when the spell finished.

No evidence.

Blue light flared up along the circle’s edge as before, but this time a tingling sensation ran through me as blue tendrils wrapped around my hands. Images rushed through my head, of places I recognised.

I knew where the creature was.

“Crap,” I said. “It’s hiding less than a mile from here. Near the Swansons’

house. If we set up a trap somewhere in the area, we can lure it away and catch it.”

“Why not here?”

“We’d have to wait for it to pick up the scent.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you that desperate to get away from me?”

“Yes.” No point in hiding it. Hell, I wanted the whole case over with as soon as possible.

“How flattering,” he said. “You don’t sugar-coat your words, do you?”

“I’m a mercenary,” I said. “We’re not known for eloquence and sophistication. Fine. I’ll set up the spell. Wow me with your conversation.”

I moved to another empty spot and retrieved the second spell I'd brought—

a trap. Or, a red elastic band. Once it hit the grass, it expanded into a larger circle.

"I'm interested in getting to know you," said Lord Colton.

I couldn't be *less* interested in him getting to know me. Wait, that wasn't quite true—hell if I wasn't curious about his own ability, and the shifter side he apparently kept hidden. There wasn't so much as a trace of the predator that supposedly lurked beneath the surface.

But I don't get on with predators. I've spent too long being prey.

"I'm really not interesting." I checked the circle was perfectly symmetrical to avoid his eyes. I wouldn't usually pass up the opportunity to get to know a handsome guy—let alone one who had crazy mage abilities. I mean, pulling a sword out of thin air? Still, I usually dated non-magical, unobtrusive guys for a reason: they wouldn't become a target for the faeries. Not that the faeries hadn't done a thorough job of destroying every attempt I'd ever made at pursuing a relationship anyway. Nothing like a fire imp infestation to ruin a first date.

"I beg to differ," he said. "You work for Larsen Crawley, but you aren't a sociopath. You hate faeries, but have a piskie living in your house. You live with a witch, but you aren't one."

I froze at the last part. "Yes, I am."

"You don't belong to a coven."

"Witches can be independent," I said. "Look it up. If I wasn't a witch, I wouldn't be able to use these spells." I indicated the circle, but his gaze never left me.

"No," he said. "An unconventional witch, then. I confess myself *very* interested."

A chill crawled up my spine. Last time I'd heard those words, they'd come from the mouth of a Sidhe lord. I looked away from him, suddenly wishing I was anywhere but here.

"I told you," I said, my voice brittle, "you don't get my life story."

His arms dropped to his sides. "What's the problem?"

I blinked, determined not to look at him, and well aware my behaviour would look downright bizarre to an outsider. He hadn't meant to speak like one of— *them*. He'd plainly never seen me in his life before we'd met in the alleyway, so either he hadn't been there the day his fellow mages turned me away ten years ago, or he didn't remember. I'd put him at between thirty and thirty-five, so he'd probably been around, but not as a Mage Lord.

I knelt down by the circle and pretended to rummage through my bag.

"You've been nothing but disrespectful, and now suddenly you want to have a friendly chat." I paused. "If you get to ask me questions, then I get to do the same to you." So sue me, curiosity won out. "What's your ability, anyway?"

He seemed to consider my question. "I'll tell you, if you tell me what yours is."

I feigned blankness. "You've seen me fight. As for magic, I have the bare minimum. I can use most witch spells, but I don't know the rulebook by heart. My friend Isabel does, though."

I could tell he didn't quite believe me, but my explanation made perfect sense and even he, for all his resources, would never guess the truth. Not in a million years.

"I'm a displacer," he said. "It means I can manipulate space and matter to some degree."

I raised an eyebrow. "You can mess with the rules of physics?"

“Not on a large scale. People think I’m a conjurer, but it’s a matter of displacing an object from one place to another.”

Wow. I’d never heard of an ability like it. What he’d done—struck down opponents from a distance, conjured objects up from nowhere—was way more impressive than standard mage tricks. Not that I’d admit so to him. He had a high enough opinion of himself already.

“So you can fetch that stone over there?”

His eyes followed my hand as I pointed. “Yes. Technically. It’d be a waste of power.”

“So there’s a limit, is there?”

“All magic has a limit,” said Lord Colton. “My ability allows me to move around the city without drawing attention.”

“Because your big-ass sword’s… where? Back at the mansion?”

“In the weapons room, yes.”

“Weapons room. How fancy.”

“You have quite the collection yourself,” he commented, glancing at the daggers at my wrists and ankles.

“Can’t be too prepared,” I said.

“They’re all iron-forged?”

“How’d you guess?”

“You mentioned you mostly kill faeries,” said Lord Colton. “Either everything you fight with is iron-forged or you have a suit of armour somewhere.”

“Ha ha,” I said. *Nice try.* “No, I like the element of surprise.” I returned my attention to the circle and placed a number of sylvan leaves inside it, which

are practically catnip to most faeries. “There. Faeries never resist the bait. All we need now is a cloaking spell to hide the circle.”

I set the second circle up around the first, knowing he watched my every move. And yeah, maybe it made me a little cocky. I rarely got an audience.

Sure, it was Isabel’s spell, but I still grinned at the mage as black lines spread over the circle. Now all that remained were the sylvan leaves I’d scattered there.

“Are you sure that will work?” He gave me that sceptical look again.

Actually, it couldn’t be plainer from his manner that he disliked not being the one in control.

“I’m sure.” Wait a moment. “If you can displace things, can’t you reach through thin air and grab the changeling?”

“That’s not how it works.”

Ooh. “Can you grab *people?”*

“No.”

Ha. I’d annoyed him now. See how he liked being bombarded with questions. “Animals?”

“We’ve got company.” He spoke matter-of-factly, but shifted in such a way that indicated he was ready to fight at any second. I did likewise.

A small figure appeared from a nearby bush. Lord Colton grabbed my arm and yanked me aside, so suddenly I almost snapped at him—but that’d have blown our cover. Silently we crept out of sight, and not a moment too soon.

The small creature crawled across the grass. It didn’t look like it was pretending to be human at all—it was the size of a child, but that was where the similarities ended. Its ears were long and pointed, as was its face, while its legs were long and delicate, hardly able to support its body. It wore

ragged clothes, the sort you might pick up at a jumble sale. Its eyes—black, twice as big as a human's—locked onto the sylvan leaves.

The creature ran towards the trap with a gleeful cry.

Well, that was easier than I expected.

Show time.

I stepped out of the shadows as the trap snapped closed. Grinning, I walked towards the circle. A pair of bulging dark eyes stared back.

"Humans," it whimpered.

"That's right," I said, grinning. "Mind answering a few questions?"

The faerie writhed and screamed. I'd have felt sorry for it, except the damned creature was faking its reaction. The circle wasn't designed to hurt, only to keep it contained.

"Humans, cruel humans, let me go."

"You're harming it?" asked Lord Colton.

I hadn't pegged him for the pacifist type. "No. It's an act. Melodramatic idiot." I took out my sword, letting the creature see the iron, and it fell silent. "You answer my questions, you get to leave. Simple."

The changeling wailed.

"None of that," I said. "You were sent in as a replacement for a human teenager. Who sent you?"

The changeling's wail reached such a pitch, it felt like my eardrums were bursting. I rolled my eyes and hurled a knife at the circle. The point missed the changeling by a hair's breadth—intentionally—and it screamed again.

The mage, however, pulled his sword from thin air again and pointed it at the thing's neck.

“Is this a good incentive to pipe down?” he inquired. “Who are you working for?”

“Nobody.”

“A likely story. I can put you under a compulsion spell,” I lied—those spells were one of the trickiest of all. “Just tell the truth, it’ll be easier. Who sent you?”

“I didn’t see his face,” said the changeling. “He was… pale. Like a Sidhe, but not. He was human. And Sidhe.”

“Human and Sidhe?” Lord Colton echoed.

Half-blooded? Half-faeries had no reason to be interested in a human child. Right?

“Anything else?”

“He carried a silver blade. Not iron, but ash.”

Lord Colton’s expression said *that’s interesting.* I hoped mine said the same, not what I was really thinking: *oh, crap.*

Only the Sidhe lords and their most important warriors used weapons forged from the hearts of their trees.

“And he asked you to impersonate a teenage human?” asked Lord Colton.

“Forced me,” the changeling croaked.

“How?” I asked.

“Spell.”

Damn. Faeries here weren’t bound by the laws that governed their lords in their own realm. There, nobody could lie, but that didn’t stop them manipulating the truth if it served them.

“Somebody put a spell on you?” I asked.

The changeling’s gaze shifted to me. “Bad faerie!” it said.

Oh, shit. Lord Colton glanced at me out of the corner of his eye.

“I’m not a faerie,” I said. “Who put the spell on you?”

The changeling tried to speak, but could only make gasping noises. I froze, my heart sinking. *Oh, no. Oh, god, no.*

It had been a long time, but I knew what a tongue-tied spell looked like.

Someone had cursed the creature so it physically *couldn’t* answer the question.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to answer,” I said quickly, aware of Lord Colton watching my reaction. “Where did he—or she—come from?”

“Faerie.”

“You’re all from Faerie,” said Lord Colton. “You’re evading, aren’t you?

I’ve heard your kind like to bend the truth.”

So he’d been researching. But did the changeling mean its creator had recently come from Faerie, or before?

“Whereabouts was the spell put on you?” I asked it.

“Acacia Road.”

I stared. That was half-blood district—the closest place to Faerie in this realm.

In other words, exactly the kind of place where somebody with a lot of magic and a lot of guts could summon up a changeling.

“So someone from Faerie put the spell on you in this realm,” I said. “Did you see the human child you replaced?” My heart began to pound, cold sweat gathering on my back as I instinctively prepared for the worst.

“Yes.”

“Where’d they take him?” My heart beat faster with each word.

“I don’t know.” The changeling burst into tears. “Let me go, cruel human.”

“Only when you give us answers,” I said in my coldest voice. “Who else was there?”

“Faeries,” sobbed the changeling, beating its tiny feet on the charred soil.

I raised an eyebrow. “Care to be a little more specific? Names?” It took everything I had to speak clearly and confidently, even with sweat running

down my spine and old memories threatening to claw their way free. *No.*

He’s not dead. You can still find him.

The changeling started to speak and choked again.

Lord Colton turned to me. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Tongue-tying spell,” I said. “Whoever’s behind this figured their changeling might get caught.” Pain in the ass. Not that I’d expected this to be easy. If I couldn’t track the Swansons’ son and the changeling couldn’t speak, we were at a dead end.

No. I wouldn’t give up so easily.

“Damn,” said Lord Colton, lowering his sword. “I’d guess it can’t speak the names of anyone involved. What does your master look like?”

“Pale. Tall. Silver hair.”

“Sounds like half the faerie-blooded population in this realm,” I muttered.

“Great.”

“Aside from the ash blade,” Lord Colton reminded me. “Trinkets like that aren’t easy to come by.”

“True.” I had to hand it to him for improvising. He’d likely never encountered this kind of spell before, but you didn’t get to be the leader of the mages by being an idiot. “It’ll be faerie-made… where would he even get that?” I snapped my mouth shut before he got suspicious, and faced the changeling again. “Who was there who you can tell us about?”

“My brothers.” He cast a shifty look around.

Oh, shit. There was more than one.

At that moment, two small figures jumped from the bushes. Three feet tall with long, spindly legs, they waved pointed knives at me. Not regular knives—faeries couldn’t touch most metals—but ones that looked like sharpened twigs.

How threatening. I nearly laughed, some of the tension knotting in my spine easing slightly. “Get in the circle,” I said.

The faeries bared their teeth at me.

I circled them, pulling out my sword. “This contains enough iron to make your skin fall off your bones.”

Two shrill screams followed. I circled back, seeing Lord Colton watching me with amusement in his eyes. “Come on, get in the circle.”

Fire exploded from nowhere and the faeries screamed, bolting across the field—and right into the path of the circle. I opened my mouth to shout a warning. The cloud of fire disappeared as suddenly as it had arrived, and a hooded figure approached, casual as anything, like a movie star walking away from an explosion.

Lord Colton regarded the man with a frown. “Must you be so dramatic?”

I snorted. He was plenty dramatic himself. I turned to the new mystery guy, who lowered his hood to reveal a crop of dark red hair. His coat was similar in style to Lord Colton's. He must be another of the Mage Lords.

"You're Ivy?" He held out a hand. "I'm Drake, Vance's second-in-command."

"And a fire conjurer?" I shook his hand warily, but it didn't burn to touch.

Interesting. His casual manner was a sharp contrast to Lord Colton's, but he must pack some serious firepower to have the title of second most powerful mage.

"That's me. What's with them?" He indicated the circle, which blazed blue as ever, keeping the changelings contained.

"We're questioning suspects," said Lord Colton.

Drake grinned at the changelings, who howled and dived away from him, pitching against the outside of the circle and tumbling into a heap. "You didn't pull the blade on them? Isn't that a witch's trap?"

"It's not worth expending my power on an interrogation," said Lord Colton.

"Ha. More like you overextended it in the fight with those hellhounds."

I glanced at him, surprised. So the Mage Lord did have a limit. And apparently his fellow mages didn't mind pointing it out. I stowed that information away for later.

"Anything else you want to ask them?" Lord Colton directed this at me .

Changing the subject, huh. I guess the head mage needed everyone to see him as invincible.

"I think we've covered everything," I said. By that, of course, I meant we hadn't learned a damn thing. "Care to help carry the changelings back? I

can pick up the spell cage so they won't escape."

He raised an eyebrow. “You want to keep them in your house?”

“I thought you arrested faeries who broke the rules.”

“Larsen’s the one in charge of that,” he said.

I groaned. That figured. He wouldn’t be pleased with me. But letting those changelings run away free would get me worse than a threat. “Fine.”

“Drake, is anything else happening?” asked Lord Colton.

“It’s bad news,” said Drake, his smile fading. “A second child is missing, this one the daughter of two necromancers.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Where?” I asked immediately. *Oh. Shit.*

“Finchley Road,” said Drake, checking something on his phone. “Two of our people are over there now. I’d be there, but I heard you’d decided to go wandering off with a witch in search of a changeling.”

Other side of town. Damn. “How d’you know it’s linked to this case?” I asked him.

“Because those little buggers followed me here after I unmasked them,”

he said. “One of them was trying to impersonate a teenage girl. Not very successfully, I might add.”

Normally, the mental image would make me smile. Except his words brought a different image to mind. “A teenage girl?” My voice rose on the last word, much as I tried to hide it.

“Yeah. Her name’s Melanie Climes. I’ve just spoken to her family.”

“Necromancers?” asked Lord Colton. “So you followed this creature all the way here?”

“I brought a car,” he said. “Little bastards move fast.”

The changelings tripped over one another in an effort to escape the circle.

I rolled my eyes at them, trying to suppress the tightening feeling in my

chest. Another child taken, and I’d come no closer to finding the culprit.

“Have you taken on the case, then?” I asked. “If it’s linked to the other changeling—and they’re brothers, so I have a feeling it might be—I’d like to talk to the victim’s family.”

Drake looked from me to Lord Colton. “What do you say, Vance?”

Lord Colton turned to me. “What are you going to tell Mr Swanson?”

“That I caught the changeling. At least it won’t be bothering him anymore.” I faced the three small creatures in the circle. “Did any of you use magic after you were told to impersonate humans?”

It was the most roundabout way I could think of to figure out who was responsible for the hellhound trap. These creatures were the lowest rank of Faerie. They’d been set up as much as we had, I was certain. Somebody else had laid the trap.

“No magic, none,” said the first changeling, as its brothers howled and beat at the circle’s side. “Can’t use magic.”

What? “You can’t?”

“No magic,” said another. “None. Magic is bad.”

So much for that. I’d known most lesser fey couldn’t so much as conjure up a spark, but I’d thought changelings might.

“What about those illegal necromantic traps in the Swansons’ house?” I asked. “Did you have anything to do with them?”

Lord Colton’s gaze shifted to me at those words, but I kept watching the changeling.

“No. Wasn’t us.”

Great. “Did you see who set them up?”

“No. No bad magic.”

“Bad magic?” asked Lord Colton, moving towards the circle. “I was under the impression *all* faeries could access a certain amount of magic in this realm.”

“You did read the handbook,” I said. “Not all of them can, actually. Not if they’ve been ordered not to, for instance.”

His sharp gaze met mine. Why was he looking at me like that?

“The piskie in my room can’t use magic,” I said. “Most low-born faeries can’t. They’re too stupid to.”

Three shrill voices protested. I tuned them out. “They’re not going to give us any useful information. I can carry them if need be, but did you say you brought a car?” I directed this at Drake, who grinned at me.

“Someone’s angling for a lift?”

I shrugged. “Figured it’d be easier to get to the Climes’ house that way.

Saves time.”

“The Climes case isn’t yours,” said Lord Colton, to me.

What was his issue? “It’s connected, isn’t it?”

“I’d say it is,” said Drake. “Come on, then.”

Lord Colton glared at me. “If you’re volunteering to carry those changelings, you’re welcome to it.”

“It’s no problem.” Actually, it was. As I crouched down, all three changelings tried to jump on my face. I had to close my eyes to concentrate on picking up the spell circle without accidentally deactivating it. As I lifted the circle to balance it in my arms, the lines converged, forming a cage.

Three screaming voices hit my eardrums.

“Quiet,” I snapped. “If you don’t shut up, I’ll pitch you into the canal.”

Drake burst out laughing. “Where’d you find her, Vance?”

I strode ahead, not particularly keen to hear them talking about me. Once we left the field, we came to a black car parked in the deserted street. Drake climbed into the front. To my surprise, Lord Colton didn’t call shotgun, but joined me in the back.

“What?” I asked him over the cage of still-shrieking changelings.

His eyes narrowed and a sharp knife appeared above the cage. “Be quiet.”

All three voices stopped.

“Nice,” I said, settling back in my seat. “Now are you going to explain why you keep glaring at me?”

“So you did find necromantic equipment at the Swansons’?” I didn’t miss the accusation in his tone.

Oh. I’d forgotten I let that slip—and now this new disappearance had happened right on necromancer territory, I guess it hit him I hadn’t told him everything.

“Yes,” I said, as the car rumbled to life and we headed down the road. “At the time, I thought you’d arrest them on suspicion of practising dark magic, so I took the burden off their hands.”

“You thought I’d do that?” He frowned. “We never arrest without an investigation. We’d simply make inquiries within the Necromantic Guild to find out where it came from.”

I wanted to hit myself in the forehead. *Idiot.* Why hadn’t I thought of that?

I’d been so wrapped up in disposing of the evidence, I’d overlooked the obvious. The Mage Lords might be too fond of their power, but they wouldn’t arrest innocent people. I knew that *now,* but when I’d first met the Mage Lord, I couldn’t have been sure.

I drew in a breath. “You’ve given me an idea. Do you have contacts in the Necromancers’ Guild, then?”

“We have regular meetings to make sure nothing’s amiss,” he said.

“Obviously nobody’s brought up this case yet, but now I know they might have been involved, this isn’t something we can overlook.” His tone, however, sounded more like he blamed *me* than the necromancers.

I stood my ground. “You threatened to charge me for obstructing an investigation just for doing my job,” I said. “When I found all the dark magic crap in the kid’s room, what was I supposed to think? I sure as hell didn’t trust you to dispose of it without causing a scene or arresting the Swansons.”

“What was there?”

“A couple of defunct summoning circles and a lot of dead rats. I already got rid of the changeling’s blood.”

“So that’s where you got it.” His eyes narrowed. “I’ll certainly be making inquiries.” He took out his phone—from thin air. Didn’t he keep anything on him? I supposed he didn’t have to bother if he could bend the laws of physics whenever he felt like it. He barked a few orders into the phone and hung up.

“Not on friendly terms, then?”

“They’re necromancers,” he said, as if that explained anything at all.

“And?”

“If dark magic’s involved, it’s on them. Ninety-nine percent of the time.”

I blinked. “Okay. But one of their kids was a victim. You sure nobody wanted to set them up?”

I didn’t have a strong opinion on necromancers, but someone had used their spells to cover up a trap with a hellhound sitting in it. Hellhounds weren’t necromancy. They were faeries. And faeries and necromancers had nothing to do with one another—primarily because the former were immortal, and the latter did death magic. Like opposite ends of the magical spectrum. I couldn’t see that as grounds for the faeries to blame someone who might be the least likely to be involved… unless they were banking on the mages’ distrust of necromancers.

“You seem to have given this a lot of thought,” the Mage Lord said.

“Are you accusing *me* of being involved?”

“No,” he said. “But you did cover up what you found at the Swansons’.”

“I told you why. If you made a better first impression, I might not have jumped to conclusions.”

Drake turned around from the front seat of the car. “What did you do, Vance?”

“Refused to help rescue a missing kid,” I said. “And pulled out his sword in the middle of a pub in witch district.”

“Really, Vance?” Drake smirked at him, nearly crashing the car in the process. I gripped the seat with both hands to keep from being sent flying as he faced the front again and spun the car around. “You’re usually better at giving a nice first impression to pretty ladies.”

Oh, please.

“The first time I saw Ivy, she jumped ten feet into the air to cut a hellhound’s throat,” said Lord Colton, leaning back in his seat. “Make of that what you will.”

“Damn,” said Drake, turning back to the front again before we collided with a wall. “You’re a witch, right? You don’t act like one.”

“You’re one to talk,” I said. I almost said *I thought all mages were stuck up like your boss is*, but managed to hold my tongue.

“Just curious,” said Drake. “We haven’t hired a witch in a while. Well, ever.”

“Drake, for god’s sake, pay attention to the road,” said Lord Colton, as we veered into a main street and the car’s side scraped against a broken-down lamp post.

“Hey, not all of us can take shortcuts through space-time.” Drake didn’t appear ruffled by his boss shouting at him. Maybe the mages weren’t as uptight as I’d thought.

“Space-time,” I said, leaning forward. “So can he grab people or animals and haul them across the city? He wouldn’t answer.”

Lord Colton shot me an irritated look.

“Ha,” said Drake. “Technically, he can, but it expends all his power.

Living things use a lot of energy.”

“How far can he reach? The other side of the world?”

Drake turned to him. “Didn’t you have a fifteen foot range, the last time we checked?”

“At least,” said Lord Colton tightly. “What did I say about watching the road?”

“Okay, okay.”

I glanced down at the spell cage. Three angry faces glared up at me.

“You’re handing these changelings over to Larsen. I want to talk to him first. They might be nuisances, but he’s downright brutal to any non-humans we drag in there.”

“I thought you hated faeries,” said Lord Colton.

“Strongly dislike,” I corrected. “These little bastards were in the wrong place at the wrong time, sounds like.” I didn’t trust them at all, but neither did I want to subject a living creature to Larsen’s cruelty.

Lord Colton watched me. He didn’t look angry anymore. “You’re not like his other mercs.”

“In what way?”

“Half of them have been arrested for public aggression, haven’t they?”

“I don’t know. They’re not my colleagues.” I respected my fellow mercenaries in general, but most of them were more into killing monsters for profit. Not my style.

“I suppose not.” He glanced up as we drove through what I recognised as shifter territory, marked by fences and houses with elaborate lock systems.

“You don’t strike me as a glory hunter.”

Probing for information again? “I’m not hunting for anything except enough cash to keep a roof over my head. So are most mercs, come to that.”

“And the time you killed the hydra in the canal?”

Dammit. Just how much had Larsen told him? From the tilt of his head, Drake was listening in, too. Looked like he’d heard my entire resume.

“It was eating people,” I said. “Nobody else wanted to get too close. The other mercs made all kinds of excuses.” It had been the closest I’d come to outing myself, but nobody else had wanted to step in. Including the mages,

actually. “Guess your firepower wouldn’t do much good against a two-headed water beast.”

Drake grinned. “Now I know why Vance is so keen to spend time with you. You don’t tell him he’s wonderful at everything.”

“And other people do?” I smirked. “If you ever want brutal honesty from me, you need only ask.”

To my consternation, Lord Colton laughed. As did Drake.

“Can we keep her?” said Drake.

“In your dreams.”

We turned into a road that bordered on a field behind a high metal fence.

Ah. Necromancer territory. They needed the fences to keep the corpses caged in case someone messed with the veil. This area had been hit hard by the war, and with the Ley Line running through the middle, it was a prime area for summoning the undead. On the orders of the Mage Lords, the necromancers had stepped in immediately after the war and cordoned off this territory before more dead people than living roamed the streets. Since then, there’d been an uneasy alliance between them. Right now, I figured the alliance was even shakier than I’d thought.

The necromancers’ main headquarters looked quiet as, well, the grave.

Thick leafless trees bordered the pavement, and the building itself hunched

in their shadow, its stone form a stark contrast to the mages’ elaborately decorated manor. A chill wrapped around me. I doubted the current necromancer leader remembered me, but I’d still rather be almost anywhere but here.

In captivity, I’d run through imaginary news stories about my disappearance. *Ivy Lane, thirteen years old. Please come home, darling.*

We're always looking for you. But no frantic parents had awaited me when I'd made it back. My home, along with the entire section of town, had been destroyed when the dark forces of Faerie rose, stirring up evil on both sides of the grave. I never did find out what exactly killed my parents—not for lack of trying. I'd bribed a necromancer with an entire month's pay to reach my parents on the other side of the veil. But too many people had died here when the human and faerie worlds collided, and even the necromancers couldn't reach them. After, I never went to that part of town. No point in stirring up old ghosts. Until now.

"I have to say, I think we have better taste in decor," Drake commented as we approached the gloomy-looking building at the end of the long fence. Its bricks were the colour of soot, probably due to a permanent spell. Like the mages, the city's necromancers were egotistical in their own way.

"Nice," I said, glancing at the skull-shaped door knocker. "That's how you play up to stereotypes."

Lord Colton rapped on the door. A short, angry-looking man answered immediately.

"What?" he said. His smart suit was more rumpled than the ever-immaculate Mage Lord's, but he looked, ironically, like a funeral director.

"As you gathered from my call earlier, we're here to talk to you about the illegal purchase of necromantic equipment from your guild."

"Bullshit," said the man. "I've logged every purchase and nothing was removed from the stores on that day."

Well. So much for that.

"Ask Larsen Crawley," said Lord Colton, a lot more calmly than I felt,

"and you'll see a number of necromantic instruments were recently turned in after being found in a human home. My resources say somebody was trying to summon a spirit."

The necromancer shrugged. “Idiot kids try to do that all the time. I can’t police everyone.”

“It’s your job to, Lord Evander,” said Lord Colton, coldly.

“Don’t tell me how to do my job.”

Whoa. At this rate, I’d see what a mage-versus-necromancer standoff would look like. The short guy looked pretty pathetic compared to the tall, imposing mage, but necromancers *did* have power over life and death. To some extent. My money was still on the Mage Lord.

“Excuse me,” I interjected. “I’m the one who found the equipment. One of the summoning circles was used to set up a trap. When the trap went off, hellhounds attacked us.”

The necromancer turned to me, narrowing his eyes. “Hellhounds are faeries,” he said. “Not my area.”

“You aren’t concerned someone might have been trying to frame your necromancers?”

“Nobody cares,” he said. “Faeries are none of my business.”

What an absolute dickhead.

“Fine,” I said. “But don’t blame me if a hellhound decides to chew on your face next.”

Drake snickered behind me, covering it up with a fake cough.

Lord Colton stepped forward. “We suspect the perpetrator attempted to use blood necromancy. Several dead animals were found at the scene.

Usually that’s a sign someone’s tried to summon a violent spirit, isn’t it?”

“I know my own branch of magic,” snapped the necromancer. “Most summoning circles drawn by amateurs are flat out wrong. All my necromancers are accounted for. They know the horrors hiding over the

city’s veil, and I can assure you none of them would be foolish enough to attempt blood necromancy.”

I blinked. “Horrors?”

His piggy little eyes bored into mine. “The invasion took place not a mile from here. Why do you think we keep all these spirits caged? Nothing but death lies over the other side.”

“The veil,” I repeated. That’s where most people went when they died, but occasionally, one spirit was stuck here and decided to stir up trouble or get violent. Your standard ghosts and poltergeists. Due to the tight fences around the cemetery, spirit cases were rare in town. Instead, the necromancers charged a small fortune to anyone who wanted to say last goodbyes to dead loved ones, and spent the rest of the time walking around in their dark cloaks, being creepy.

The only requirement to join them was the ability to see spirits. Kind of like the Sight, but with dead people rather than faerie magic. Personally, I’d prefer to see ghosts than faeries, but if having spirit sight required hanging around this place, the necromancers could keep it.

“Your people pass through the veil all the time, do they not?” said Lord Colton.

“Yes, the first layer,” said the necromancer. “None are foolish enough to stray beyond. If your client wishes to hire me to extract a poltergeist, direct him to me and I’m more than happy to give him my rates. But I don’t think this is what’s happening. I think you’re trying to accuse me of treason.”

“I’m not accusing you,” said Lord Colton, his voice both steely and calm all at once. “Just trying to get to the bottom of this case. Your guild is involved, like it or not.”

“I beg to differ,” he said. “I have a summit to conduct tomorrow, and I have better things to concern myself with than paranoid mages.”

And he shut the door in our faces.

“Who pissed on his grave?” I asked in an undertone, earning an amused look from Lord Colton.

“What do you know of necromancy?” he asked me.

“Enough,” I said. “What he said about the veil—I thought all necromancers could walk into death. I didn’t realise there was a limit.”

“The invasion took a number of lives in a short time,” said Lord Colton.

“I would guess those spirits were sent into a place nobody could reach them.”

Yeah. Like my parents. I kept my hands at my sides, clenching my fists to stop them shaking.

“So, I guess that’s it,” said Drake. “Unless we sneak back later, though I can’t say I’d like to face the necros after sundown.”

“No, we need to talk to the Climes family,” I said. “I can use another tracking spell and see if their daughter’s still here.” I’d left the changelings in the car, which probably hadn’t been the best idea, but I could hardly bring them up to the door to the necromancy guild.

“I already asked a witch to do it,” said Drake. “Didn’t know you were an expert in tracking.”

“Technically, my flatmate is,” I said. “Was the witch you hired called Isabel?”

“No, but I know the name. She’s second in line to the Laurel coven, isn’t she?”

Wow and wow again. A mage actually knew the titles of the local witches.

Lord Colton turned to me. “I doubt the tracking spell will work, given what happened last time.”

My shoulders slumped, but I looked him in the eyes. “Giving up, Lord Colton?”

“No. We need a new strategy,” he said. “We’ll take those changelings back. Whereabouts are Rod and Bailey?” he asked Drake.

“Combing the city, like they’ve been doing all day,” Drake responded.

“Er, I should probably let them know we caught the changelings.”

“You mean you’ve had your people walking around looking for them all day when a simple witch’s spell trapped them in half a minute?” I asked, finding this absurdly funny. Not for the first time, it struck me that mages were surprisingly oblivious to magic outside of their immediate circle.

“Apparently,” said Drake.

“Witch spells are usually the most direct,” said Lord Colton, “but that doesn’t mean it’s the first idea we’d think of.”

Okay. I’d thought he didn’t possess an ounce of humility. Maybe I was wrong.

“So, back to Larsen’s,” I said. “How—”

A shout made me spin around. Drake ran towards the car, fire sparking from his hands.

Crap. The car door lay open, and the changelings had gone.

CHAPTER NINE

I stood outside the hedge bordering on half-blood territory and drew in a breath. I'd never been to this part of town—at least, not beyond the boundaries. Just as I'd never walked into one of the necromancers'

graveyards or the witches' coven meetings. It's a matter of respect. But short of wandering around hoping I ran into a friendly half-blood on the street, my only option was to walk right into their home and hope they didn't shoot at trespassers.

Seeing half-bloods that looked like Sidhe doing ordinary things like taking the bus and shopping messed with my head. Their ethereal beauty didn't look like it belonged in this battered world. However, when I entered half-blood district, I saw how they'd adapted their surroundings to mimic Faerie. So much, I didn't want to set foot in there.

I'd survived a dressing-down from Larsen for letting the changelings get away. I could get through this.

Behind the boundary of half-blood territory, golden sunlight shone from nowhere, though pale grey clouds smothered the sky where I stood. Hedges grew thick and green, surrounding a gate. Not metal, of course—the gate looked as though it might have grown out of the trees themselves, forming

an elaborate pattern of branches. Beyond, I glimpsed fountains and decorated lawns, and impossibly bright flowers blooming at every corner.

The eerie part was the faint tinkling of faerie music. I wished I'd brought earplugs. I always hated that sound. Gripping my sword, I did my best to tune it out. Stupidly, I wished I wasn't alone, but like hell would I bring Lord Colton here. He'd come too close to guessing my secret—close enough that any guess he came out with would put me in danger. It was too risky to spend any more time with him than I had to.

A tall figure jumped from the hedge and straightened up. *Definitely* a half-blood. Six feet tall, pale and silver-haired, he fit the changeling's description so exactly I stared like an idiot for a moment.

The faerie gave me a frosty look. Now I saw the human in him—his ears were rounded, not pointed, and his face wasn't perfectly symmetrical. Still, enough of him resembled a pure faerie to make me want to go for my weapon.

"Your name?" His voice rang in my ears like a melody. Ugh.

"Ivy," I said. "I'm here to speak to…" I fumbled for the name. "Alain."

The faerie whose beautification spell I'd recovered. That was the last time I'd helped a half-faerie, and I figured they'd be more amenable if I spoke to someone I'd done a favour. Maybe she'd seen something, or knew someone who had. If the necromancers wouldn't give us answers, maybe the half-bloods would.

"I know you," said the guard. "You're one of Larsen's lackeys."

Nice. "I'm self-employed," I said, "and I'm here to talk to one of my former clients about a confidential matter."

The guard’s eyes narrowed. “No iron in here. Leave your weapons there.”

He pointed, and a hole formed in the side of the hedge. “Nobody will steal them.”

Damn. This went against all instinct, but I did have my magic. And I needed to get inside there. I gathered my daggers together with my sword—

the faerie guard raised an eyebrow when I pulled the spare one out of my bra—and put them into the hole in the hedge. I felt naked without them, especially my sword. Poor Irene would have to cope without me for a bit.

“Can’t be too careful,” I said in explanation. “I take it your people won’t harm me?”

“I can’t make any promises,” he said.

Pleasant guy. I followed him through the carved gate and into a clearing.

Birdsong filled the air, and a full-on assault on all my senses almost sent me running back for my weapons. The scent of a thousand flowers created an eye-watering perfume that stung my nostrils, while the cries of a thousand birds played in the background. Had to be a spell, because I didn’t see any birds behind the thick fields of flowers. Grassy lawns filled the remaining space, while a breeze brushed my skin like a caress, though not a gentle one.

“This is Seelie territory? Does Unseelie live somewhere else?”

“No,” said the faerie guard. “We have this one area as our territory.” There was an unspoken accusation in his voice. Why? Because his kind had been restricted to one territory? They hadn’t even lived here before the war.

“So you alternate between Summer and Winter?” I guessed, looking around at the ever-blooming bright flowers. Sure, it might look beautiful, but Summer hid its fangs behind sweet smiles. Winter showed their fangs for the world to see. I knew which I preferred.

Around the clearing were… houses. That's how I'd describe them, though they ranged from ordinary blocks of flats to literal holes in the ground. Troll nests, probably. I'd checked the half-faerie's address and it led to one of the flats, so I left the guard behind and wandered over that way.

My skin itched, both from the heat and from the insects. Piskies buzzed in my ears, the grating sound of faerie music punctuated the twittering of birdsong, and I ground my teeth together. It was like someone had plucked my definition of the ninth circle of hell from my head and thrown me into it. Bloody faeries.

I walked amongst the buildings until I found the right one, and rang the buzzer.

"I'm Ivy Lane, here to see Alain."

A male voice replied. "You're who?"

"I'm the consultant who helped find Alain's missing beautification charm."

The door opened, and an angry face peered out. Of course, being a faerie, the guy glaring at me looked inhumanly gorgeous, but still. "Why do you want to talk to her?"

Oh, crap. Her boyfriend? Most likely. Same as most faeries, he wore his hair long, while his features were sharp enough to give you a papercut. His eyes were chips of green glass, and he looked like he ought to be wearing medieval armour, not a T-shirt and jeans.

"Just to ask a couple of questions," I said, pretending not to be discouraged by his unfriendliness. I gave him the abbreviated version of why I was here. Faeries took everything literally, so I made sure I didn't sound accusing towards him, or any of the other half-faeries. God knew I'd had enough of accusations for one week.

"No. I haven't seen anything," was his only response.

Okay…

“I need to know if you’ve seen any shapeshifter faeries around here, or someone commanding them. Or someone with a… silver ash blade.” I trailed off as he stepped towards me. Man, the guy was a giant. I didn’t think faeries were made like that. Unless he had troll blood, which I seriously doubted. His face was like a work of art. But I found it the opposite of attractive.

“No swords here,” he said. “We don’t need them.”

Green light crackled around his hands. I resisted the urge to step back.

“That’s not necessary,” I said. “I’m here investigating a child’s disappearance.”

“Human nonsense is none of our business.”

“A changeling told me he came from here.” I indicated the flowery bushes and tall, ancient-looking trees surrounding the block.

“You’re accusing me of stealing mortals?" His hands curled into fists at his sides.

“I’m not accusing you,” I said as calmly as possible. “I’m stating the facts. Believe me, I wouldn’t be here if I had a choice.”

Wrong thing to say. He threw the magic at me, forcing me to drop to the ground, shredded knees scraping against paving stone. Green light shot over

my head and a wall of brambles sprang up where the magic struck. Summer magic.

“What the hell was that for?” I pushed to my knees, fighting a wince. I really needed to replace these jeans.

“A warning,” he said. “We don’t talk to humans here.”

“I did your girlfriend a favour,” I said, cursing myself for stripping off all my weapons off before entering. “I’m just asking for one in return.”

“We paid for your services already,” he said.

“Can’t I at least talk to her?”

He muttered under his breath. “Fine. Alain, this human bitch is here to see you.”

“How lovely,” I said, shooting him a glare. My fingers itched to conjure up some magic of my own, but he knew I was human, and that’d drag up questions I didn’t want to answer.

Alain came to the door. Her eyes were red, like she’d been crying.

“What?”

I swallowed the impulse to ask what was wrong. “I wanted to know if you’d seen anything suspicious. There was an incident involving faerie magic being used to summon hellhounds.” I decided against mentioning somebody had used it to make changelings—I didn’t want to give the guy any ideas. “Has anyone used a particularly strong spell lately?"

“No.” She didn’t offer any more detail. Her gaze remained on the floor, her hair lank and greasy like she hadn’t bothered washing it. I guessed my attempts to convince her she didn’t need to use the spell had failed.

“Fuck off, then,” said Alain’s boyfriend. “We don’t want you here.”

“Charming to meet you, too.”

Without warning, a jet of icy water drenched me from behind like someone had switched on a shower above my head. Pulling sodden strands of hair out my eyes, I turned to see the water in the fountain behind me spilling over the edges.

I whirled to face Alain’s boyfriend. “Did you do that?”

In answer, he shut the door in my face. She didn’t even come to my defence. Of course not. Bloody half-faeries only looked out for their own

kind.

A growl sounded behind me. Oh, shit. It sort of sounded like—a guard dog?

Or rather, a guard *kelpie.* The giant horse dragged its heavy body out of the fountain, sending a second spray of water into the air. Taloned claws dug into the now-drenched grass. Its eyes were like horizontal slashes, and it easily came up to my head.

“Oh shit.” I backed away, fetching up against the block’s door. I’d handed every one of my iron weapons over, and had nothing but a few sopping-wet spells hidden in the inside pockets of my coat. And salt, which only worked on dead things.

Idiot.

The horse leaped into the air, talons outstretched. I instinctively threw myself to the ground and rolled over, getting a second soaking for my trouble. I ducked into the building’s shadow and yelled for help.

Unsurprisingly, nobody showed up. I was only a human, way down on their priority list.

Hooves tapped on the path as the beast stalked towards me, huge head swinging. The creature’s skin was blue-black, its mane thick and soft. There was wild beauty in its movements, but I’d never been a horse person. And its teeth, when it opened its mouth, were like sharp white razors.

I’d backed against the wall. If I ran, it could jump fifteen feet and catch me.

The beast charged. I dodged to the side, my back catching against its hooves—it had moved fast enough to turn into a blur, and changed directions just as quickly so it didn’t collide with the wall. I jumped to my feet, digging into my pockets for—anything.

The kelpie waved a talon and a whip-like cord of water latched itself around my ankle, yanking me into the air. The contents of my pockets—

spells, jars and all—fell to the ground and smashed. Blood rushed to my head as the summery garden swung around me. Wet hair hung around my face. I fought to free myself, but the whip—whatever it was—gripped like an iron cuff.

Teeth closed around my other ankle, and I screamed.

Before the teeth could chomp down, the beast's feet slipped out from underneath it. I fell, landing in a rolling movement on instinct and skidding to a halt on the grass.

The kelpie howled, flailing. It had walked into whatever I'd dropped from my pockets, and something hurt it. Wait. I'd carried a jar of iron filings in there as a backup plan. Small amounts of iron weren't painful, but coupled with broken glass and the kelpie's feet were torn up.

So was my ankle. I got to my feet, wincing, as the kelpie leaped over my head in one smooth motion. It disappeared into the fountain, and a final wave of water crashed over my head. I spluttered and gasped, eyes stinging, but the faerie horse didn't reappear.

I groaned, brushing sodden hair from my face and checked the damage.

Its teeth had pierced the skin and the wound already itched like crazy.

"You total *dick!* " I screamed at the flat door. "I hope your beauty spell gives you both hives."

Alain's face appeared in the window and she mouthed something at me. I moved closer, my ankle throbbing with each step.

"What?" I snapped.

"I saw something," she whispered.

"You saw—the missing kids?"

"No. But someone came here. The Lady of the Tree. She's one of the most powerful Old Summer spirits in this part of the country. She lives in the Old

Oak in Pleasance Park.”

Before I could respond, she’d closed the window.

Okay. So I had a clue. Anger still burned inside my veins as I hobbled across the lawn to the exit. First, I’d get my weapons back. Then, I’d see what this Lady of the Tree might know. But like hell was I ever walking into a faerie’s lair unarmed again.

By the time I’d limped home, my ankle was bleeding worse than ever.

Luckily, Isabel had left the insta-dry spell on the threshold because of the rain last week, so once I walked into the building, all the water immediately vanished from my clothes. Sometimes living with a witch was kind of awesome. I unlocked the flat door, hobbling inside on one leg.

Isabel raised an eyebrow. “What happened this time?”

“Faeries.” I spat out the word like a curse. “I’ve had bloody enough of them.”

“You’re bloody enough,” she commented, looking at my ankle. “I’ll get a healing salve.”

“You’re incredible, you know that?” I limped into the living room and collapsed onto the sofa. Isabel was rarely fazed by my tendency to get injured at least once a week.

One healing salve and a microwaveable meal later and I felt slightly less like death. I watched Isabel set up her latest batch of spells while waiting for the healing to kick in. Our version of home entertainment. She didn’t want a TV, and I found they made me jumpy as hell on bad days anyway.

Having a piskie flying around was enough.

“You stink of kelpie,” Erwin informed me.

“That’s because one tried to take a bite out of me,” I said. “Have you ever heard of the Lady of the Tree?”

“The Lady of the Tree?” He spoke in a reverent tone. “She’s the wisest of Summer’s faeries.”

“Summer, huh.” I’d never had reason to really think about the distinctions between Seelie and Unseelie—all faeries in this realm were unpredictable anyway. If a faerie had been behind the disappearances, which realm had it come from? Might Summer or Winter be involved? Not that I could do anything if they were. And where I’d been in Faerie didn’t fit into the usual rules.

It killed me, having to contact Swanson again and tell him I still didn’t have any new leads. I wasn’t about to walk into faerie territory again while bleeding like this, so I’d have to delay until my ankle fully healed. All I had was a nebulous clue and a name. A faerie. Considering the way my luck was going, I couldn’t count on this Lady of the Tree, however wise, knowing about the disappearances either.

My phone buzzed again as soon as I’d reached the sofa after setting it down on the coffee table, and I hesitated before getting up. As I’d already called Swanson, it must be either Larsen or the landlord, neither of whom I particularly wanted to talk to.

Isabel got there first. “Since when did you have the Mage Lord’s number?”

What? “I don’t,” I said, taking the phone from her. “He doesn’t have mine either… *Larsen.* I’m going to kill him.”

“Who’s on your hit list next?” asked Vance Colton. I’d hit the ‘accept call’

button while still speaking.

“Larsen.” I pressed the phone to my ear. “He should know better than to give out my number to strange men.”

“Strange men? I’m insulted. I think you know me quite well by now,” he said. “What are you doing?”

Er… “I’m at home.” No reason to mention my little excursion.

“Come to the manor.”

“Was there a ‘please’ in there somewhere?”

“Please do me the honour of coming to the manor. I’ve left you alone for a day, which means you’ve likely got yourself into trouble.”

“He’s got a point,” said Isabel, who was listening in.

I sighed. “Right, fine. I’ll be there in half an hour.”

CHAPTER TEN

Lord Colton didn’t answer the door this time. A young woman dressed in secretary-style work gear did, and gave me a friendly smile that disconcerted me a little.

“You’re Ivy, are you?” she asked. “I’m Wanda. It’s been a while since we’ve had any new blood here.”

Speaking of blood, my ankle had finally stopped bleeding, though blood stained my ankle and covered my left boot. Wanda, however, didn’t seem to notice. She must be one of his staff, but it threw me that there was nothing magical about her appearance. I’d expected everyone here to walk around in cloaks like *Harry Potter* extras.

“Is Lord Colton waiting for me?”

“He’s in there.” She pointed at a door at the corridor’s end.

I walked along, wondering why he hadn’t invited me into his office. The answer became obvious when I passed by the door to the room we’d spoken

in last time. At least five people stood inside, looking like they waited in line. Wanting to speak to him? What was he doing, holding out on them?

I opened the door at the end of the corridor. To my surprise, it led into an open conservatory which looked out across bright green lawns. Not as

bright as the ones on half-blood territory, but the garden looked well-tended, with flowerbeds Isabel would be proud of and hedges carved into animal shapes around the edges. A grand piano sat in the corner of the conservatory, and a number of potted plants were scattered around the polished floor. I stopped. I never did like plants, and after my latest escape, I expected to find faeries hiding in every corner.

Nearby, Lord Colton spoke into his phone, giving some kind of order. As usual. How many mages did he command? Had to be at least fifty. He was responsible for the whole region. This house must be their main headquarters, but it didn't look as though many other mages were present.

Otherwise someone would be back there, dealing with his visitors.

He saw me and nodded. "Yes, I'll speak to him later. I've got a client bleeding all over my floor."

Bleeding? Oh, shit. I'd left bloody footprints all the way from the door.

"What did you do?" he asked. "I spoke to you five minutes ago. You can't have been attacked already."

"You called me when I was in the middle of healing up," I said. "No chance to wash my shoes."

Technically I did have time, but I wasn't used to walking into fancy places like this. Larsen didn't care if I got blood everywhere when I walked into the clean-up guild.

"Quentin, please clean the blood from the floor," he said.

A short figure popped out from behind a plant pot, barely up to my knees.

His tanned, knobbly skin made me recoil.

“Faerie,” I hissed.

“I’d kindly ask you not to insult my assistant,” said Lord Colton, putting his phone away. Or rather, pushing it at thin air, where it promptly vanished.

“What? Me or him?”

The faerie bristled, glaring at me with beady bird-like eyes.

“Quentin here is my assistant.”

“You have a faerie slave?”

“Slave?” Quentin looked insulted.

Lord Colton eyed me. “I thought you knew about faeries. Brownies have a compulsion to clean houses—well, any building. If I didn’t tell him to, he’d do it anyway. Once they’ve moved into a home, they see themselves as guests of whoever lives there.”

“And that’s not exploitative?” Sure, I knew brownies, but I’d never have pictured one in a place like this.

“Not if I give him the choice in the matter. Quentin, you can leave.”

The faerie looked up briefly, shrugged, and carried on cleaning.

I blinked. “That seems… wrong.”

“He does as he wishes. Not unlike yourself. Did I hear you were poking around the half-blood district?”

Dammit. He’d probably had people tailing me. “Yes. They’re the closest to the faeries, so I figured they’d know if anyone decided to pop over here for a visit.”

“And did they?”

“No clue. They won’t listen to reason, and one of them sent a kelpie to take a bite out of me.”

“You’re good at making enemies, aren’t you?”

I glared at him. “You try reasoning with a half-blood. It’s like expecting common sense from a troll.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Perhaps. I’ve spoken with half-bloods before and found them amenable, but perhaps they’re more respectful of authority figures.”

He did *not* just say that. “Wish I’d called you first. See how you like getting chewed on by a kelpie.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “You’re giving me that look again.”

“What? Like I’m about to skewer you?”

“You look more like you’re pouting.”

“I don’t pout.” What game was he playing this time? “You know there are people in your office waiting to talk to you, right?”

“Unfortunately,” he said.

“What, isn’t that your job?” I’d thought he was dedicated to his work.

Obsessively so, even.

“We’ve dealt with all the priority cases today,” he said. “These are people asking for favours. It’s our policy to help any mage who needs assistance, but there are always those who take advantage.”

“Because they can afford it?” I sure as hell couldn’t. Even if someone blew my house up in a magical explosion, I’d have to go to Larsen for help.

Ugh. Larsen. I repressed a shudder. He’d screamed the place down when I’d admitted to losing the changelings, and told me not to set foot inside there

again until I'd caught them. Unfortunately, I'd used every last drop of changeling blood in the last tracking spell, so the odds of finding them again were needle-in-a-haystack low.

Larsen could wait. Finding those kids was more important.

Lord Colton frowned at me. "Our rates aren't extortionate. Your boss underpays you."

I snorted. "You tell *him* that. In fact, you're welcome to. He's pinned the blame for the changelings' escape on me."

"What?"

Dammit. Why the hell had I told him? Every piece of information I gave him could be used against me. He was an asshat, but he seemed to have got over the accusing stage by now.

I shrugged. "I'll handle it. Once we're done with this case."

"He's asked you to bring the changelings back?"

"Yeah. Unfortunately, I'm all out of blood for tracking spells." *That's enough, Ivy.* "Never mind. You were saying you always have to deal with people coming here and asking questions. Do you ever leave this place?"

"I live here," he said, indicating the open conservatory.

"Wait, this is your house?" I stared around at the fancy furnishings.

Damn. From outside, I'd guessed the place had at least twenty rooms.

Maybe more. Surely too many for one person. "You live alone?"

"I inherited the house from my parents."

"Really? So they're dead?"

"They were killed fighting the Sidhe in the invasion."

Well, crap. I didn't know what to say. *I'm sorry* wouldn't cut it, seeing as it'd come out insincerely. "But you only became leader of the mages last year, right?"

"The house has been open to all mages since my father's time," he said.

"This was originally a place of shelter before the invasion. Mages often aren't able to easily hide their abilities the way witches can, and have the potential to be a danger both to themselves and to each other. Safe houses like this were set up to alleviate the risk."

Oh. I'd assumed the mages were exclusionary because they thought themselves on a higher tier than anyone else in the supernatural community

—admittedly, the mages had done nothing to mitigate that assumption until recently.

"So there are others here?"

"Not at the moment. Aside from yourself, Wanda and Quentin. I think you scared Ralph away."

"I wasn't that bad. He does look like a faerie. No teenage boy has skin that clear."

Lord Colton looked at me with amusement in his eyes. "You're a menace," he said. "He's quarter-blooded—three quarters human, one quarter faerie. He never met his faerie ancestors. His mage side came out on top, as it usually does."

"That can happen? You're partly shifter… right? I saw during the fight with the hellhounds."

His expression was unreadable. "Quarter-blooded, yes."

Hmm. Again, I kept forgetting what Henry had said… that the Mage Lord's shifter blood belonged to the most powerful branch of shapeshifter.

Right now, I couldn't tell. Then again, most shifters were indistinguishable from normal humans, at least until they transformed. Though *normal* wouldn't be the first word that came to mind when I thought about Vance Colton.

"Er. I know a family of shifters," I said. "They live in the upstairs flat.

That's why I wondered." I didn't quite have the courage to mention Henry had sniffed him out. I wanted to keep the Mage Lord as far away from my home life as humanly possible.

He tilted his head. "You live near shifter territory, don't you?"

"Yes. Do you have family over there?"

He paused before saying, "Not that I talk to on a regular basis. Are you faerie-blooded?"

The question was so unexpected, I gaped at him for a good thirty seconds.

Alarm rang through me. *What did I do?* Had I given myself away? I hadn't

—at least, I thought not—but why the hell would he ask *are you faerie-blooded* like it was as ordinary as asking, *is it raining outside?*

Clenching my sweaty hands at my sides, I said, "No. Why?"

"The changeling called you a faerie."

"More like a faerie killer." Come on. I wasn't unattractive, but even quarter-blooded fey looked more faerie than human, if his security guard proved anything. "I'm not a faerie."

He couldn't see my magic. But his stare burned through me, and I looked away from his eyes. *Don't go there.* As Mage Lord, he had grounds to be suspicious of me. I was lucky the question hadn't come up sooner.

To change the subject, I asked, "What about the missing kids, then? Got any other leads?"

“Have you?”

I hesitated. I wanted to go it alone. This crap was way too dangerous to drag Isabel into, and she was the only person I’d trust to walk with me into the faeries’ territory. If I was forced to leave my weapons behind again, though, it wouldn’t hurt to have someone with me who could grab a sword out of nowhere.

“After setting the kelpie loose, one of them took pity on me and said they saw this ‘Lady of the Tree’ walking around,” I said. “Apparently she hardly leaves her own territory, so it might be a sign of a power shift. Or something. It’s all I’ve got, anyway.”

“Whereabouts?” he asked.

“Pleasance Park.”

He nodded. “Very well. I’ll see to my clients, and then we’ll leave.”

And that was that. With nothing better to do, I walked back to the entrance, where Wanda still waited in the reception area.

“Hey,” she said. “Is the Mage Lord finally dealing with those people?"

“Yes, he is,” I said. “Are they really asking for favours, or is he just trying to get out of work?”

“I think he wants to prioritise the missing person’s case,” she said. “He hates that we’ve made no progress at all. It makes us look bad.”

“I’m the one who originally signed up to investigate,” I said. “And I haven’t got too far either.”

Aside from some useless clues and a sore ankle, I had nothing. And it bugged the hell out of me. I was good at my job. Not least thanks to Isabel’s spells. They always worked. And there were lives at stake. Not only had I messed up, I’d let three changelings escape and potentially put my job in jeopardy. Worry for the missing kids aside, my future looked like a line of dominoes ready to collapse. If I failed the case, more kids would be taken.

Whoever was behind the kidnappings would walk free. I'd lose my job, and Isabel and I would lose our flat and become homeless.

Yeah. Things were as bleak as the underside of a troll's foot.

"What's he like to work with?" I asked Wanda, to take my mind off my own failings.

"Lord Colton? He's good at his job."

"I mean, personally," I said. "I was under the impression you didn't work with witches, yet he hired me for this case." I also wanted to ask if he regularly spoke to business partners the way he'd spoken to me.

"For him to take a personal interest means he thinks the entire magical and supernatural community may be affected," she said.

"Really?" I shouldn't have been surprised, considering the way he and the necromancer had almost blown up at one another. It still didn't explain his personal interest in the case—and in me. "I thought he only dealt with cases people paid him for."

"Technically, the money goes to our Guild. This case, though… it's odd.

I've never seen him go to this much trouble before."

Hmm. "This is a rarity? Doesn't he deal with magical cases personally?"

"As many as he can, but one person can't be in seven places at once. I get the impression he *would* be, if he could. He has a protective streak a mile wide, and he dislikes sending his people into danger."

That, I hadn't expected. "Seriously?"

She nodded. "Why is that a surprise?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. You guys always struck me as…" Self-centred.

Exclusionary. Probably not a good idea to use either of those terms. “I mean, he’s not exactly the friendliest of people. He and the leader of the necromancers got into an argument. Does that happen often?”

“Every other Tuesday,” she said. “I joke, but the necromancers are awful people. All they care about is watching the veil, not this realm. The faeries could invade again and they’d lock themselves in their own basement and look the other way.”

Huh? “They did that last time?”

“Essentially. When it became clear some serious cleaning up was needed, the Mage Lords persuaded them to come out and help. I was young at the time, so I don’t remember.”

“So you’re a mage, then?” I asked, to take my mind off the sudden surge of anger that lanced through me. The necromancers had looked the other way while my parents died.

“Yes, I’m a frost mage apprentice.” She smiled. “I’m told you’re a talented witch.”

“Who told you that? Drake?” I doubted it—he’d never seen me use magic. But the mages’ leader had shown me nothing but disrespect.

“Lord Colton, of course. He said your tracking spell’s the best he’s seen.”

Oh. Figures. “My friend made it,” I said. “Didn’t think the guy handed out compliments. He seems to strongly dislike me.” Judging by the way he’d instantly accused me of foul play when he’d found out I’d covered up those spells I’d taken from the Swansons’ house, anyway.

Unless he showed different sides of himself to different people. Which made him dangerous. Untrustworthy.

Intriguing, some part of me said. I paid it no notice.

“Are you ready?” asked a deep voice behind me. Lord Colton. The people he’d been speaking to had presumably left through another exit, because the

three of us were alone in the reception area.

“Yeah.” I glanced at Wanda, but she didn’t seem cowed by the Mage Lord. So I guess he didn’t intimidate his staff if they could speak openly to me about him. *Right. If we get a chance to talk later, I have a few more questions.*

“I haven’t heard back from any of the others patrolling the town,” he said.

“I suppose we’d better follow your lead, since it’s the best we’ve got.”

“Way to give me a backhanded compliment,” I said, rolling my eyes.

He shrugged. “You yourself said it’s an unlikely source. I’ve sent a mage ahead to scout, so he’ll let us know if the coast is clear.”

I eyed him. “Probably won’t be, if you show up wearing that fancy coat.

Every faerie in town will know something big’s happening.”

He frowned. “I’ll leave the coat behind.”

I grinned. Score one for me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lord Colton joined me at the door within five minutes. Even unarmed and without his coat, he still looked irritatingly authoritative. I had to face it: we'd draw attention wherever we went. I wore a torn-up pair of jeans and a long-sleeved top stained to the elbows in what had once been redcap entrails—a souvenir from my second least favourite job. The Mage Lord, on the other hand, had attempted to dress casually in plain black, but his clothes were obviously tailored and expensive-looking.

"You're staring," he said. "Do I meet your approval?"

"If you're asking for fashion advice, I'm not your girl." I indicated my torn-up, stained clothes. "Does everything you wear come with a dirt-repelling charm?"

"Quentin usually puts one on to stop me from leaving mud on the carpet."

"Ah." I looked away, because apparently I couldn't trust my eyes to stop lingering on the way his shirt showed off his muscled arms and broad shoulders. "Right. Come on. Let's get this over with."

“I’m flattered that you’re so delighted to spend time with me.”

“Please. You give yourself too much credit. As I said, I’m using you as a backup system should things get ugly out there.”

“Are you always this polite to your colleagues?” he inquired.

“Nah, you made it onto my special list.” *And you’re one to talk.* I clamped my mouth shut and pushed open the door.

One of the mages’ black cars had already pulled up outside the gates. I didn’t recognise the driver this time around. Lord Colton climbed into the front, leaving me alone in the back.

“Where’s Drake?” I asked as the car rumbled to life.

“Patrolling,” he said. “We’ve got everyone on the lookout for those changelings.”

Damn. The changelings… They’d been taken. But by whom? And why?

Someone had put a spell on them to stop them talking, but it didn’t mean someone smarter than me couldn’t get the information out of them. The person who’d taken them might have been the one who set them free in the first place. Just to clean up loose ends.

Unease prickled up my spine. Maybe I ought to have asked Isabel to come along. She was the best at tracking, after all. Hell, if I’d asked Isabel to help me find the first changeling rather than running off with the mage, she might have been able to find a way to get answers from it herself. There were certainly ways of extracting information or even undoing spells like that tongue-tying charm. Though if a Sidhe had done it, maybe not. Faerie and witch magic were different entities. One wouldn’t necessarily counteract the other.

“You look like you’re thinking hard,” Lord Colton said from the front.

Must have seen my reflection in the wing mirror.

“Trying to work out what possible traps we might run into,” I said.

“Pleasance Park isn’t listed as belonging to a particular group,” he said.

“It’s more or less abandoned, actually.”

“Makes sense that the faeries stepped in, then,” I said. Faeries flocked to places where nature had reclaimed the land from humans. After the war, there was no shortage of such areas. One reason I preferred the city to the countryside. But faeries, as I’d learned the hard way, adapted easily—

certainly better than humans would have adapted to living in *their* realm.

Then again, faeries were immortal.

I ran through my inventory. I was running low after losing all the spells I’d carried into half-blood territory, but Isabel had started on another batch of explosives to pick up when I went home. For now, my iron weapons were my best bet. Irene rested at my side, ready to bite into anything that attacked me.

Unlike half-blood territory, this area looked like a normal park—dead grass and trees under dull grey sky. An old play area complete with seesaws and swings covered in rust and overgrown with weeds, lay beside a crumbling path with grass peeking through the cracks.

“Looks like a cheerful place for a Summer faerie to hang out,” I commented as we stepped out of the car.

Lord Colton joined me. “I didn’t know there was a rule.”

“Summer faeries like things to be… bright. For Winter, creepy dark forests are more their style.”

“Hmm.” He eyed the wooded area a few metres away. The Lady of the Tree apparently lived inside an ancient oak inside there. Might be a dryad.

They were usually mild-mannered as far as faeries went, but I wouldn’t take any chances. Irene rested in my hands, and I scanned the undergrowth

before walking towards the forest as though I didn’t want to run as fast as possible in the opposite direction.

I hated forests—hated the way the branches closed over my head and cut out the sunlight, and the way every sound set my teeth on edge. I refused to scream like a little girl in front of Vance Colton. I took the lead, gripping my sword with both hands.

A rustling sound made me jump, but it was only Lord Colton. He’d grabbed a weapon of his own—not the long sword, but a dagger the length of my arm. So I wasn’t the only one on edge. Somewhat gratified, I took the lead again.

“Wish someone had given us specific directions,” I said after we’d walked for five minutes in silence. My sense of direction wasn’t terrible and we hadn’t walked in a circle, so the woodland stretched further than I’d thought. Must be a spell, because most public parks before the invasion had never been this size.

Trees crowded either side, and no path led the way forward. We navigated our way through undergrowth and piles of fallen leaves, and over rotting

tree trunks crawling with insects. The forest appeared to reflect the season outside—early autumn—so it couldn’t be made from faerie magic. I wasn’t likely to forget Unseelie’s creeping dark forests of ice or the achingly bright colours of Seelie territory. Faerie wore masks of all kinds, and it was all too easy to become ensnared in a trap. The fact that we couldn’t see where we’d come in made a chill creep up my back even though I hadn’t heard a suspicious sound yet.

Actually, the quiet was too absolute. Aside from our rustling footsteps, no birdsong or the sound of small creatures rustling in the undergrowth interrupted our path. And no faeries, either, though this place would be a haven to piskies and other small creatures.

Five minutes later, the whispering started.

At first, the sound was so quiet, I'd never have picked up on it were it not for my sensitive hearing. Lord Colton didn't appear to have noticed, so I kept silent, listening out. No words reached my ears—just meaningless whispering. Creepy as hell.

"You hear that?" I asked.

"Hear what?"

Crap. Either my ears were more sensitive than I'd thought, or only people with faerie magic were tuned into the whispers. Considering my track record with faeries, I'd bet money on the latter.

"Might be hearing things. I thought there was a voice."

Lord Colton glanced at me and lifted his blade. So he trusted my judgment? Or maybe he was being extra cautious. I didn't blame him a bit.

I watched the trees as we walked, but they didn't appear any different from ordinary English oaks. Acorns and bright leaves littered the way and brambles tangled in our path. I could have stepped over them, but after certain experiences in Faerie involving thorns, I decided to skirt around them instead.

Finally, the trees thinned out, revealing a clearing. In the centre lay a huge oak that extended into the canopy and beyond.

This is our tree. The roots were thicker than my body, fanning out and all but swallowing up the trees around it. I didn't want to climb over them in case it came to life and tried to eat me—as happened on a disturbingly

regular basis in Faerie. I took the lead, finding a gap to approach it from the side.

A smiling face appeared in the bark, so sudden and grotesque I jumped.

Okay. So not all Summer faeries were beautiful. Her face was as gnarled as the tree trunk, her mouth a sneer, and her eyes were black pupil-less pits.

“Such an odd time for visitors,” she crooned, her voice harsh as nails on a chalkboard.

I wanted to back away. Instead, I stepped forward. “We’re here to ask if you’ve seen any mortal children in the hands of the faeries.” No point in wasting words.

“Mortal children. Pretty mortal children.” She grinned. “He needed them, he said. Never said why.”

What? I stared a moment, heart freefalling. No way. She—she couldn’t mean the Swansons’ son. I hadn’t even said his name. Maybe she was trying to unsettle me. Successfully.

“Wait,” said Lord Colton, apparently reading my thoughts from my expression. “We don’t know for sure who she’s talking about.”

Maybe not, but I never took anything faeries said at face value. “Who took them?”

“The Lord of the Grey Vale.”

Ice shot down my spine. My throat closed up, my skin going clammy. *No.*

Not there. Anywhere but there.

I should have known. The odds of a rogue sneaking in from Summer or Winter had always been low. No. Our enemy came from the Grey Vale…

from between the realms.

From the place I’d escaped.

“His name?” I croaked.

The lady’s mouth fell open, and a choking noise escaped.

Shit. She’s bespelled, too.

My lungs tightened, lightheadness sweeping through my body. I tried to step away, but my feet didn't seem inclined to move. *Goddammit, pull yourself together, Ivy.*

"Where did he take them?"

Lord Colton's sideways look made me certain he'd seen me totally freeze up. For once, I didn't care what he thought. Nothing else mattered but the horrible words escaping from the faerie's mouth.

"Where they belong, with their master."

"Shit!" This time, I managed to take a step away, my hands tightening on the solid iron of my sword's hilt. Wisps of blue magic flared around me as a tremor surged through my fingers.

"In this realm?" I whispered.

"Not anymore." She gave me a mournful look. "Not anymore."

I jerked back, her words hitting me like bullets. I wanted to fall to the ground and scream. We were too late, far too late. The faeries had already taken the children out of this realm.

We'd failed.

Damn. Damn them all. I glared at her, tears stinging the corners of my eyes. Blistering rage rose white-hot and melted every last drop of fear away.

"Who the hell handed them over to the faeries? Why?"

"I did," croaked the Lady.

I stared in disbelief. "How—why would you do that?" More blue wisps of smoke rose alongside me, thickening by the second as my anger climbed.

She did it. Of course human lives meant absolutely jack shit to her, like every fucking faerie in existence.

Her face crumpled. “Because my life is limited in this mortal plane. We cannot go back to our own realm, and so we wither and die as you mortals do. I did what I needed to do to preserve my own life.”

What the hell was she talking about? “You sacrificed kids to the faeries to preserve your own life? Is that what you’re saying?” I stepped closer, my voice deathly calm. The weapon in my hand was steady, and I’d cut down her damned tree if I could get those kids back.

A hand rested on my arm. “Wait.” Lord Colton, who looked as surprised by my outburst as the Lady did, turned to her. “What were you promised, exactly?”

This time, the impact of what she said sank through my rising fury. *We wither and die as you mortals do.* I thought faeries were immortal… but

this realm wasn’t like their home. Could they really die if they stayed here too long?

“He made a promise,” she said. “We can return home. I don’t know what they need the children for, but that was the promise. I gave them the son and the daughter, in return for my life back.”

“How?”

“Blood,” she whispered. “Pure blood from the heart of our own realm.”

“What?” Now I sounded plain stupid. Blood. Faerie blood. An image burst to life in my head, of crimson-blue faerie blood exploding all over my hands and my blade as I delivered the killing blow to the lord who’d taken me.

“The blood of an immortal can temporarily restore our lives.” She smiled sadly. “I’ll have my life back, and then—”

“You’re saying if another faerie gives you their blood—one from Faerie itself—it’ll make you immortal again?” asked Lord Colton.

She bowed her head.

“But why did they want the children in the first place?” asked the mage.

He, at least, had managed to keep his head together.

She choked before she could speak.

This time, I didn’t pity her. I hoped she’d choke on her own blood. But that wouldn’t get those kids back. “Whatever spell’s on you, you’re going to tell me where to find them, or I’ll kill you.”

I moved towards her, and the ground collapsed underneath my feet.

One second, I stood on packed soil. The next, I was falling. A scream jammed in my throat as I dropped a good five feet before rolling over onto a sliding shelf made out of earth.

Hands grabbed me—clawed hands. I liked to think I could keep my cool in a crisis, but claws reaching out of the soil to pull my hair sufficiently freaked me out enough to make me scream.

I kicked out blindly, waving my sword around without caring what I hit.

However, no body followed the clawed hands.

Holy crap—those weren’t hands. The tree’s roots were attacking me.

A root stabbed at my head and I ducked, the movement dislodging more soil and causing me to drop further into the ground. Shit. The only way to the surface was to climb on the roots before they stabbed me.

Another root jabbed at my head, spear-sharp. As I dodged, two more grabbed my ankles, yanking me onto my back. I hung onto Irene and attempted to stab one of them, but the imbalance nearly caused me to drop my sword.

Cursing, I lunged sideways to dodge another strike, trying to reach my ankles to cut my way free. The roots responded by pulling me into the air and throwing me against the earthen wall. My back hit packed earth,

knocking the wind from me, while the branches squeezed my ankles until I snarled in pain.

I dodged another blow and aimed the side of the blade at the branch wrapped around my right ankle. The blade cut into the bark and a spray of blue-red brightened the roots. The Lady of the Tree—she wasn't controlling the roots, she *was* them.

Goddammit. Another strike forced me to pull away, and the angle was too precarious to risk stabbing the attacking root without catching my own leg in the process. I needed to get at the heart of the tree to kill it, but that was above the ground.

A sword materialised without warning, stabbing the main root as it aimed another jab at my face. The blade sent the root flying back, severed in two, and faerie blood spurted out.

About time, Lord Colton. He must be standing above me. I took advantage of the pause to dig my blade into the root on my right ankle again. This time, it sliced through as easily as a knife through butter, and a horrible keening sound rose up around me. The root blackened, permanently damaged by the iron. But there were plenty more where that came from.

Another root tried to take my eye out. I raised my arm and it glanced off the thick sleeve of my jacket. Quickly, I stabbed upwards at the attacker, just as Lord Colton's sword appeared again and struck out, almost slicing through me.

"Dammit," I muttered. "Can't you at least look before you make a sword materialise next to my—"

The root still wrapped around my left ankle tugged me into the air. I hung upside-down, swearing. I waved my sword, but I couldn't get at the right angle to free myself with the blood rushing to my head.

Lord Colton, however, could. His blade appeared again and severed the root that held me. Unfortunately, that caused it to let me go… right above the gaping hole in the ground.

I yelped as I fell, hand scrambling for purchase on the edge. My hands latched onto soil, a sickly smell rising in my nostrils.

Faerie blood. Bright blue and red. I blinked, a familiar image playing behind my eyes. Crimson blood, and blue magic—

“Ivy.”

Lord Colton. I couldn’t see him, but his voice came from nearby. My grip shifted on the soil. I wasn’t in Faerie. I was in the mortal world, and I wouldn’t let them take me.

Hands grabbed mine and pulled me out of the earth as the tree’s roots rose to strike again.

My sword flashed. Twigs and bits of soil flew everywhere, along with a fresh wave of red-blue blood. I spun around and ran from the roots, blade in hand. I’d cut the heart out of the tree, consequences be damned.

“Ivy,” said Lord Colton. “Wait. She might be the only person who can tell us where the children are.”

“She can’t,” I spat. “Thanks to the spell.”

Lord Colton stepped towards the tree, his cool grey gaze locking onto the Lady’s face. “Is there no way to remove the spell, or to get around it?”

“No,” she croaked. “It can only be removed by the caster. As for getting around it—” Her mouth split into a grin—“It depends how much you value your freedom.”

Freedom. Faeries couldn’t lie— *that* was a spell, of a kind. But it came second to the most important spell of all in Faerie: promises. If you made a promise to a faerie, as far as I knew, it could override anything.

Roots blocked my path, surrounding both myself and the Mage Lord.

Anger still pulsed through my veins, but if I killed her, I’d lose my one chance for answers. Lord Colton was right. I’d dealt with faeries long

enough to know there wasn't only one way.

"You tell me where the person who took those children is hiding, and I'll owe you a favour. Make a vow."

My heart thumped. This was dangerous—hell, I of all people knew the risks of making a deal with one of *them.* A promise was the most powerful of spells. Maybe enough to negate the silencing spell placed on the Lady of the Tree.

I expected to have to stab her again. I didn't expect her to fall silent, the roots withdrawing into the soil until nothing remained.

"Very well."

Huh? She must have a hell of a favour to ask if she gave in so easily.

"Where can I find the children?" I asked. It was impossible to be specific enough for faeries not to find loopholes, but I hoped the question would work. "Give me the address."

"Seventeen Blake Street."

I stowed that away for later. "And the favour?"

"I will call you when I need it."

Roots shot from the ground and sent me tumbling head over heels. I pitched against a tree at the clearing's edge, and looked up to see the Lady's face vanish into the bark.

Lord Colton approached. He reached to pull me to my feet, and I was too surprised not to let him. I stumbled against him, noticing his clothes remained immaculate. Again.

"Are you okay?" He let go of my hand, leaving a trail of warmth. I hadn't noticed how freezing I was, in spite of the sweat and blood drying on my face. None of the blood had landed on him, either.

“I’ll live.” I probably looked like a reanimated undead, but that hardly mattered. I shook dirt out of my hair and brushed it from my clothes, just to avoid stares later. Not because I felt ten times as dishevelled next to the Mage Lord.

“You made a deal,” said Lord Colton.

“It was all I could think of. Faeries are big on promises. It’s their thing.”

“Really, now.” He didn’t sound accusing. Just curious. Apparently, he’d accepted my expertise and let me take the lead. And he’d helped me, even if

his sword had almost taken my head off. Maybe having him along wasn’t such a bad deal.

Maybe I didn’t mind not being alone for the walk back through the creepy forest.

“Damn,” I said. “We actually got a lead. What d’you say? Should we go?”

He stared at the tree, a crease between his brows.

“Lord Colton?”

“Call me Vance,” he said.

Okay. Didn’t expect that. “Should we follow? She’s one of those pure faerie types, so she didn’t lie.”

“She might have concealed the truth, though. Right?”

I smiled despite myself. “Now you’re getting the hang of it.” I paused.

“I’d say we go. But get backup.”

He flashed me a smile, too. “Now *you’re* getting the hang of it.”

Touché.

CHAPTER TWELVE

One terse phone call later, our silent chauffeur took us to the other side of town. I fidgeted, aware I was still covered in dirt, but Lord Colton—Vance

—didn’t comment on the bloodstains I left on the car’s seat. The driver’s eyes kept flickering in my direction, though he didn’t say a word.

“Do you know this place we’re going to?” I asked Vance.

“It’s an old abandoned factory. Nobody lives in that district anymore, so I never thought to send anyone there.”

“So your mages are patrolling within the town limits? Or just your own territory?”

“As much ground as we can cover,” he said. “From the Necromancer Guild up to our end of town. Maybe that’s a mistake. If the person responsible is operating from the abandoned part of town, it opens up a lot of other possibilities.”

The abandoned part of town… “People left there during the war.”

“Left, or died,” he said.

I kept my eyes facing the front, my hands clenching on my lap. My grasp on geography wasn’t the greatest, and I hadn’t seen a map of the town recently, but I was pretty sure the Lady of the Tree had given us an address

in the area completely destroyed during the invasion. The part of town I’d lived in, once. I didn’t want to discuss my history, so I figured it’d be best to feign ignorance. “So we’re going past necromancer territory?”

“Yes. Whereabouts do your jobs usually cover? Within the town’s limits?”

“Yeah.” I paused. “None of my cases have ever given me this much hassle.”

“Not even the hydra?”

“No. Have you been reading my records?” Dammit, Larsen.

His eyes remained on me. “As I said, I looked into your history. I’m curious. From the rate of your jobs’ completion, you ought to be earning twice what you do. Working for Larsen is limiting you.”

Yeah. Well, I might be out of a job by the week’s end unless I solve this case and find the changelings again. And probably grovel a lot. Ugh.

“I thought I said not to tell me how I should be doing my job.”

“That wasn’t my intention,” said Vance. “I was merely making a suggestion. Clearly, working for Larsen doesn’t make you happy.”

I gave a short laugh. “It pays the bills.” *Not that you’d know what it’s like to live hanging over the edge of poverty.* He’d been born into a family of privilege and power, never in danger of being trampled underfoot when the faeries invaded. I didn’t hold grudges if I could help it, but damn if he wasn’t getting on my every last nerve. Even if he had a point. I *hated* being dependent on Larsen for a living.

“There are other options,” he said.

“For a witch with basic skills?” I shrugged. “It’s not that bad. Irene would rust if I left her behind to go and work at a bar or shop.” I tapped the sword at my waist.

“You named your weapon?” he said, a bemused expression on his face.

“You didn’t?” Of course, he was unarmed. His weapons had disappeared after we’d left the forest where the Lady of the Tree lived, presumably back to the manor. “Guess you own a hundred swords. I have one. Irene’s been with me since I started working for Larsen.”

“Hmm.” His eyes shifted from the sword, and I flushed when I realised the side of my top had ripped open at some point during the fight. Because

not so much as a speck of dirt had landed on him, I’d forgotten my clothes were shredded from being thrown around by the tree roots.

Hoping he couldn’t see my blush, I said, “Now you’ve got my life story, I get to know yours. How’d you get elected to the top of the Mage Lords?”

A moment’s pause. “I killed the last guy.”

I blinked, startled. “You what?”

“He went out of control.” Vance’s manner was casual, but something in his tone suggested he didn’t welcome further questions. *Okay.…*

“Is that possible? I thought…” I didn’t know what I thought. Hell, I didn’t know much about mage abilities at all. Not that it was possible to lose control.

“Everything has a limit,” he said. “Some more than others.” He glanced out the window. “We’re almost there.”

A chill crept up my arms, sending every stray thought away. The park might have looked abandoned, but the sounds of traffic from the town had still been audible. Here was a ghost town. Hopefully not a literal one. *Glad I’m*

not a necromancer. Every house had a distinctly abandoned look, and the few remaining cars were rusted and battered. Further along, signs of the war became more obvious—doors hanging from hinges, ground torn up, holes in the road. The old red brick factory lay at the road's end, its cracked windows reflecting the slither of sunlight peeking through the grey clouds in the sky.

The factory looked like the least obvious place for a faerie hangout. It was too enclosed, too human. Still, I shook all over, like that kelpie had hurled another wave of icy water over my head. What was the matter with me? We hadn't even set foot inside yet. No obvious threats presented themselves.

And yet I wanted nothing more than to get away from here. Far away.

"Ivy?" Vance have me a curious look. What had I been doing, staring vacantly at the building?

"Just got a bad vibe." Obviously. Since there was supposed to be a child stealing evil faerie hiding here. And we needed to get inside if we wanted to get the missing teenagers back.

The door had been kicked in already, but Vance pressed his foot to the dangling remains and shoved it aside. He shrugged. "We want them to

know we're here."

"Stealth isn't your thing, is it?"

"It is when I need it to be."

The creeping vines over the door gave the odd, uncomfortable sense of entering a forest rather than a building. The smell of mildew mingled with something else, a familiar scent like rotten flowers. The smell of *them.*

The hairs on my arms stood up. Was I imagining the smell? Possibly.

Faeries had a way of learning your deepest fears and then hitting you with them. If there was some kind of opening to Faerie here in this building…I'd run.

No. You won't. Those kids need you.

Goddammit. Ten years later and I couldn't help feeling like that scared, helpless little girl the faeries had tormented. I clenched my teeth together and gripped Irene, stealing comfort from the way my hand fit snugly to the hilt. *I'm not her. I'm not that girl. Not anymore*.

"Wish the Lady of the Tree gave us a floor plan," I said when we came to a long corridor. I didn't want to search the whole building. My bravado only stretched so far before it'd snap like cheap elastic.

Another rattling sound ghosted through the corridor. The wind? Or a spirit? *Goddammit, Ivy, get your shit together.* Ghosts were harmless compared to anything *living* that might await us in here.

"Don't like haunted houses?" asked Vance. The dim light made it hard to see his face, but I'd bet he was smirking.

"This isn't a haunted house, it's a den for dark faeries. Imagine the most twisted ghost possible on crack and you aren't even halfway there."

Wisely, he shut up.

I looked around the corridor. Other than cobwebs, there were no signs of life. But the smell pervaded. The smell of the darkest corner of Faerie.

It shouldn't be here in this realm. At all.

"Left or right?" I asked Vance.

"Right."

He sounded confident, but then, he always did. Still, I turned right anyway.

The corridor changed. Or so it seemed. Blue light spilled from somewhere, though there were no windows. Vines snaked along the floor, and I stopped, expecting them to move and strike me like those roots. The decaying smell grew worse than ever.

Then the music started. A familiar piano tune that crawled down my spine like a thousand ice-cold spiders.

Fucking faeries.

Faeries leave marks wherever their magic strikes. The parts of the mortal world they touch are never quite the same afterwards. Looking into that corridor, a metallic taste rose on my tongue, the dizzying smell of flowers hit me like a heavy blow—and above all, the music, that damned music, slid into my bones.

I shook myself fiercely, not caring when Vance gave me an odd look. Just another perk of being tuned into Faerie. He didn't know how good he had it.

The thing about Faerie is, even when you're there, it often seems like a dream. Every memory of the place carries a dreamlike tint. The only reason I hadn't lost my mind when I came home was because it was too easy to forget it really happened. To me.

Certain sounds brought all those memories rushing back. Like most music. Certain smells—decay, a death scent on the breeze—had the same effect. I blinked, alarmed to feel tears stinging at my eyes.

There was real magic here. No jokes, and no replacements. Not even the pale imitation of half-blood district. This was one hundred percent faerie.

Not Summer, nor Winter, but the dark magic of the awful between place that clawed its way into my dreams. And I'd tried so, so hard to escape it.

"Ivy?" Vance watched me. In the dark, I couldn't read his expression.

"This is our place," I said.

"How do you know?"

Instead of answering, I made myself step forward. Whatever fear held me back, those kids needed me. I kept that knowledge in mind, made myself hold onto it, as we walked deeper into the building. The blue light showed

the way, but only up to a metre in front of us, leaving everywhere else in darkness.

Vance kept his weapon out, too, and one eye on the vines climbing up the walls, too. Maybe my suspicions weren't unfounded.

"Do you hear that?" asked Vance.

"The music?" The faint melody still pursued me, much as I tried to ignore it.

"Music? No. It's like singing."

A chill raced up my back. "No."

Vance caught my eye. He didn't look scared, he looked pissed. "Right."

Without warning, his sword appeared, catching the blue light as it sliced the air. Nothing materialised.

"You could have grabbed a torch."

"It's a dispeller," he said. "Reveals and negates hostile spells."

"Really?" I blinked. Then I listened out. The music had stopped. Had his spell worked? Or had the faeries sensed us and changed their plan?

I hoped for the former, but luck was rarely on my side.

I trod carefully, but no movement followed. Thanks to the light, I now knew the corridor ended ten metres later. We turned the corner, and stopped.

The space at the end, which ought to have been the building's centre, was empty. Just…gone, like someone had demolished the middle of the building and left the edges intact.

And in its place… Cobwebs. Too many to count. They formed a mat across the gaping hole in the ground.

Light flared as Vance took something from his pocket.

“This detects life forms,” he said.

A witch spell. “Why not use it before?”

“It only works up to ten feet. I’d rather know in advance, wouldn’t you?”

He held up the spell. “Nothing living in here.”

“Seriously?”

“A false trail,” he said. “Damn.”

I frowned. “Unless the spell doesn’t count faeries as living because they’re technically immortal. Not living.”

He looked at me. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.” And then I stepped back. Dead. The spell only detected the living.

A hand reached from within the cobwebs, clawing at my ankle. I jumped as a human sized figure leaped from the web. One. Two. Three. Human shaped, but not alive. Their faces were sunken, their bodies emaciated.

Undead.

Well, shit.

I cursed myself for not bringing extra salt, then one of them jumped at me. I swung my blade, severing its hand, but another undead took its place.

I hit that one with my sword’s side and immediately regretted it. The undead’s face caved in but it kept moving, head hanging at an unnatural angle. The foul smell dove down my throat and made me want to gag.

Vance snarled and lashed out, sword disappearing and decapitating two in one movement. His sword reappeared in his hand long enough to send

another one flying across the web, head over heels.

“That one was mine,” I said, kicking another down. They were flimsy creatures, once you got past the ick factor.

Somebody must be controlling them.

As that thought crossed my mind, another, bigger figure appeared from the cobwebs. This one was tall and spindly, legs long and twig-like.

“All mortals who dare stray into my realm will meet the same fate as the other fools,” whispered a voice.

I stilled, dread curling around my heart.

“Who are you?” Vance asked.

“I am the one who hears all. If you wish to look upon my face, you may regret making that choice.”

“Then show yourself,” said Vance.

I frowned. Then it hit me: Vance didn’t have the Sight. Way to forget the obvious.

“What the hell are you?” I said.

“I am one who never sleeps, bound to walk these mortal walls.”

“You’re banished here?” I guessed.

“Cursed.” The figure spat out the word. “Cursed and tormented, mortals.

It would be my pleasure to watch you die.”

Cobwebs came to life, grabbing my legs and pulling me towards him. I struggled, but the webs climbed up my thighs, gripping like thick ropes. I twisted around, slashing with my blade. The webs couldn’t have been part of the faerie, because no blood spilled, and the sticky aftermath coated my

blade, making it impossible to cut my way out. Fear locked my legs in place as I realised my sword, my beloved Irene, was swamped in spider webs. I couldn't pull the weapon free.

Two tendrils reeled me in, and though my panic spiked higher, the faerie was dragging me exactly where I wanted it to.

And it made the mistake of thinking I was a normal human.

Vance's sword appeared and slashed, but the cobwebs immediately rose behind me, forming a wall. I heard a muffled sound as the blade struck the wall of webbing, but even Vance's sword couldn't cut through it.

Now it was just me and the faerie.

"What would you give me in exchange for your life essence, human?"

My life essence? Was this faerie like the Lady of the Tree—dying, and desperate for a replacement for the immortality of Faerie? I'd met more than a handful in the between realm. Creatures desperate enough to suck your skin from your bones for an extra day of life.

Luckily, I had a defence this creep didn't know about. I let the web pull me in, readying my backup weapon.

The cobweb strands pulled me. The faerie bared sharp teeth in a grin.

I called the faerie magic.

Here, in a place thick with faerie's essence, the magic rose like smoke and snaked around my sword, pushing against the cobwebs. With faerie magic, I could resist any other faerie's ability. It only activated in a crisis, and if any time counted, it was now.

My sword flashed, severing a hundred cobweb strands at once. Blue light flared from my other hand, pushing the faerie's cobweb spell away. The stickiness vanished from my legs and I managed to stand upright, new energy flowing through my veins.

The faerie, however, smiled at me.

“Did you really think I would not see Avakis’s spell lies over thee?”

“You’ve got the wrong century,” I said to cover up the instinctive horror that struck at the sound of his name.

Avakis. How could this faerie know? *How?*

“You’re the human who survived,” whispered the faerie. “A drop of our blood will more than suffice to make you immortal.”

Make *me* immortal? “No thanks. Know anything about missing human children?”

The faerie laughed. “What use would I have for mortals?”

“You tell me. Did you take them?”

“I took no mortals before you came here.”

“Know anyone who did? Are they here?” If the Lady of the Tree had lied, she’d pay.

“No.”

I moved, slicing the rest of the cobwebs free, and leaped at him.

The faerie directed another cobweb skein to push me aside, forcing me to land at a crouch in front of him.

“Your power will serve me.” He turned transparent as smoke, whirling around me. I blinked, sight blurring, heart thundering. What was Vance doing? Probably still trapped behind the wall of cobwebs. As I turned around, the faerie reappeared and the wall of webs collapsed in a white mass. Vance leaped out and threw himself at the faerie with a ferocity that startled me. The faerie must have revealed himself fully, because even Vance couldn’t have aimed so accurately without being able to see his adversary.

As it was, he bodily slammed into the faerie. Bones crunched and the faerie screamed as Vance landed on top of him, pinning him down.

Then the cobwebs struck again, dragging Vance away from the dazed-looking faerie and forming a wall in front of my legs.

Vance tried to hit the faerie, but a wall of bluish light pushed him back.

Faerie magic. Even when Vance pulled out his sword, he might as well have hit an invisible barrier. Teeth bared, he sliced upwards with the blade

against the cobwebs, but for every one he severed, three more took its place.

This place must be fuelled by something. Spells couldn't exist in a vacuum, and the faerie had to be fuelling the cobwebs somehow. He'd been a Summer faerie, once, and had mentioned stealing my life force.

Oh. My stomach twisted. I'd met this type before. Summer faeries used life as an energy source, and some of them amassed power by sucking the life out of others. Or from mortals. Bile rose in my throat. Those undead…

the bodies under the floor… how long had they been here?

A roar sounded. Vance leaped from the cobwebs, his arms now covered with black scales. I gaped a moment, then spun around, searching for the faerie. Vance landed beside me, sending strewn cobwebs everywhere, and drew his sword again.

"He's drawing power from somewhere," I said. "He told me he wanted to take my life force. I reckon he's a Summer exile."

"How to kill it?" Vance moved to my side. "Iron didn't work."

"It should," I said. "Unless those cobwebs are iron-proof. But they can't go on forever." *I hope not.* This faerie had been here for years.

The creature appeared behind Vance and shot me a grin before blasting him with magic. My shout of alarm was lost as Vance hit the wall of spider webs

with a force that shook the floor. *No.* I ran forward, speed enhanced by the faerie magic still flowing around me, and tackled the faerie. My blade kissed its neck.

“Stop there,” I gasped out.

The faerie glared at me. “You murdering bitch. You shouldn’t touch me.”

Blue light sprang from my non-weapon hand. I smiled. “Mad because I killed Avakis?”

“The Lord of Grey should have been immortal,” hissed the faerie.

“Clearly not.”

The faerie screamed aloud as I dug the blade in harder for the killing blow, but its skin was like concrete and my sword moved a centimetre before a blast of magic hit me. The smell of decay knocked into me like a train, my eyes watering, blackness crowding my vision. I kicked, grappling

to get a hold on my own magic. Blue light flared along my hands. The faerie flew back, screaming, legs flailing.

Then its hand clenched around the knife I’d dropped.

The blade flew past me—right at Vance, who’d staggered to rejoin the fight. If it hit, it’d be a fatal shot to the heart.

I didn’t stop to think. I ran, shoving Vance out of the way. Unfortunately, that put me in the path of the knife. It grazed past me, and pain blossomed up my right side.

I caught the knife’s handle, took aim, and threw it at the faerie.

Unlike him, I didn’t miss.

The faerie dropped onto its back with a coughing laugh. “Avakis… I lived for the privilege of seeing your magic again.”

Another cough, and its chest rattled to silence.

Words rang in my head. *Your magic*. He meant *my* magic. Avakis's magic was my shield now, and the thought made a fresh wave of bile rise in my throat. I turned away and vomited, my throat burning. Blood flashed before my eyes. I'd been cut, but my sight blurred too much to see how deep.

Pretty deep. Crimson soaked my side, but I refused to pass out. My pride wouldn't allow it.

Vance's face swam before mine. "We're going back. Now."

"Get… my weapon first."

A rustling movement and Irene appeared in his hand. He'd used magic…

Oh, god. He'd seen *me* use faerie magic.

His hand gripped my arm, and I started at the contact. The world faded out, then back in—and we stood in the manor's hallway.

He'd transported both of us across the city. And Vance's expression was pure Mage Lord murderous as he faced me. "What the hell was that?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Crap. “What?” I said stupidly. The copious bleeding coupled with the draining effect of the faerie magic wearing off pushed me to the brink of passing out. I leaned against the desk to hide my weakness.

“What did you do?” he repeated. “That magic you used on the faerie. I saw it.”

Yeah. Of course you did. “I killed the faerie,” I croaked, my throat raw.

“Don’t I get a ‘thank you’?”

Vance’s eyes flashed. He looked tired but not injured, which would have relieved me if not for the expression on his face. The black scales on his hands hadn’t receded yet, which accounted for the throbbing pain in my arm where he’d gripped it when he’d transported us out of there.

There was no way at all to cover up what I’d done. None. All I could do was spin what I had left into a good cover story. But this guy was a thousand more times more discerning than anyone I’d met.

“So,” he said. “Faerie magic. You didn’t mention that on your licence.”

“It’s a hobby,” I said. “I told you—you don’t get my life story. I guess I have faerie ancestors somewhere.” I was at my lowest ebb, but I’d keep my

secrets on pain of death. For all he knew, I *might* have faerie ancestors. My family tree didn’t exist anymore.

“You told me you were human.”

“I *am* human,” I snapped. “What do you want, a DNA test?” The room swayed. Goddammit. He didn’t appear to notice the blood dripping from my side onto the plush carpet. His eyes were narrowed to slits in an animal-like manner and the aura of power I’d noticed during the fight crackled around him like lightning. The part of me wasn’t about to faint from blood loss turned to watery terror, and my hand rested on the desk, leaving a bloody handprint. “You’re not human yourself, so it’d be hypocritical of you to attack me even if I wasn’t.”

He glanced down at the black scales on his hand like he’d only just noticed them. “I never denied what I was,” he said. “But you’re in denial about your own identity. Is that why you only accept menial pay from Larsen?”

“What the hell does my job have to do with anything?” I shot at him. “I kill faeries. Magic helps me do that sometimes. I’m crap at regular witch magic.”

“You’re not a witch at all,” he said. “Are you?”

“I don’t know.” Damn. Why did this have to happen now? “You’re the one who came up with the definition. Your sort define ‘witch’ as any magic user who doesn’t belong to your little cult. I’m not a necromancer, so

‘witch’ is the only label left. Not my problem if you don’t like it.”

“I didn’t come up with the definition,” he said. “But you don’t have a licence for magic.”

I laughed harshly. “So give me one. I saved your neck, Vance. Even you can’t deny that.” I managed to shut my mouth before the accusation escaped

— *your people abandoned me when I was desperate.* He’d pried enough secrets from me already. Even if he didn’t hold my abilities against me—

and I couldn’t yet be sure those claws wouldn’t make a reappearance—the very last thing I needed was pity.

I wasn’t that scared girl anymore. I’d reverted into her back then for a moment, during the fight, and it irritated the crap out of me. Almost as much as the fact that I’d thrown myself into the path of a knife on Vance Colton’s behalf and not had so much as a word of thanks for my trouble.

“No,” he said, “I can’t deny it. Nor can I deny you deceived me, and put myself and all the other mages in the town in danger. Did you know about the faerie beforehand?”

“No, I’ve never met him in my life,” I said. “Most faeries attack me on sight because they’re assholes. I figured *something* evil was waiting for us in there, since you don’t go into a creepy old factory expecting a surprise birthday party.”

His eyes narrowed a little at the sarcasm. “You’re an infuriating woman.”

“You’re not exactly a stellar personality yourself.” The room swayed.

“Also, your carpets are tacky.”

“Cheap insults will get you nowhere.”

“But it’s worth it to mess with you.” I attempted to walk. My wound disagreed. I bit down on the pain, pushing it aside, refusing to let him see how dependent on his mercy I was.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.” The word came out weaker than I’d have liked.

He moved to bar the way. “If you think I’ll honour your whims after that, you’re mistaken.”

“Whims? This is my safety I’m talking about. You think the faeries will leave me alone if you tell the whole city I can use a tiny bit of their magic?”

If all else fails, the guilt trip’s a guaranteed success. I *hated* admitting weakness, but he was the type who wouldn’t relent until he was the one in control.

“If they all find out,” I continued, “every faerie in the region will come down on me in a swarm. I’ll die. You’ll lose this case, those kids will be trapped in Faerie forever, and your reputation will take such a hit, I doubt you’ll ever recover.”

His mouth parted a little. “You think I care about my reputation? I was under the impression we were going to find two missing children in the factory. Instead, I found out you were deceiving me.”

“My heart bleeds for you.” Bad choice of words. I accidentally looked down at my wound, and nearly fainted at sight of all the blood.

He frowned. “You’re bleeding on the carpet.”

I drew in a shaky breath. “Oh, I’m terribly sorry. I’ll try to bleed to death in the hall next time.”

“There won’t be a next time.” His tone went deadly quiet, the sort he might use before decapitating someone. “Sit down.”

“What?”

“Sit down.” He pulled a chair out of thin air, startling me so much I fell into it without meaning to, leaving a trail of blood behind me.

“Are you going to teach me how you do that?”

“Stay where you are.”

I slumped to the side, closing my eyes against another wave of dizziness.

“Have you ever spoken a single sentence that didn’t involve ordering someone around?”

He didn’t answer, because he’d disappeared. Not going to kill me, then.

Okay.

Next thing I knew, cool hands pressed to my side. My limbs were too numb to move, though I feebly pushed the person’s hands away.

“Don’t move. You’ll make it worse.”

“Huh.” Apparently, I’d lost more blood than I thought. If I didn’t know better, the Mage Lord was at my side, his cold hands over the wound. A fragrant aroma filled my nostrils. A witch’s spell. Since when did the mages keep hedge witch healing remedies?

Probably because they work. Within seconds, the blood flow halted, the world stopped spinning long enough for me to open my eyes, and I jumped.

Vance leaned over me, my blood dripping from his hands… and my clothes were shredded worse than ever. Indecent, even. I was practically topless, the ruins of my T-shirt hanging from my side and exposing my bra. At least it was plain black, strapless and, god forbid, without any holes. Still, I shakily grabbed my jacket before this got any more awkward.

“A thank you would be nice.” Vance hadn’t even looked at my exposed skin. Not in more than a cursory manner, anyway. Score one for Vance Colton. And another for healing me. It warmed me inside, though like hell I’d admit it. I wasn’t entirely sure he was done accusing me of being buddies with Faerie.

“Thanks.”

He grunted and turned away, conjuring a handkerchief to wipe the blood from his hands.

“I have to go and shout at some necromancers,” he said, still standing close enough to make me self-conscious about the amount of skin I had on show. “Assuming you aren’t about to tell me how you knew how to beat the faerie’s spell. Even my sword couldn’t cut through those cobwebs easily, and I thought all faeries were allergic to iron.”

“They are,” I said. “I reckon that creature had been there feeding on people’s lives for years. The cobwebs were a defence mechanism. It only had a few good attacks left in it, I think, otherwise it’d have been more aggressive from the outset.”

“And *your* magic? What can you do?” His tone didn’t sound accusing this time, but I knew I needed to clear this up, now.

“Mine’s defensive,” I said. “When a faerie attacks me with magic, my own magic acts like a temporary shield. It deflects other faerie magic, and my speed and accuracy increases. Just lasts a few minutes, usually. And it only works on faeries. Iron works just as well, so I use my sword instead.

You can put me under all the tests you like. I’m telling the truth."

A long pause. He studied me, and it struck me that the barely-restrained power I’d seen crackling over his head had disappeared like it had never existed. Instead, there was only him, without magic, without the claws, and the faint scent of the witch spell he’d used to heal me.

“Did you know what was waiting in the factory?” he asked. His gaze remained steady, but warmer than before.

“No, of course not. The tree faerie either lied or told us a half truth.”

“I believe *that,”* said Vance. “I’m less convinced you aren’t hiding important information.”

“What good would that do?” I said. “Don’t you think if I’d known how to get those kids back, I’d have done it by now? I’ve been as upfront as possible, but you’ve given me no reason to trust you.”

His brow furrowed. I'd bewildered him. Maybe 'don't accuse your employees of plotting against you and threaten their livelihood if you want them to trust you' wasn't in the mage handbook.

I tried to put myself in his position, but I couldn't imagine having such a level of influence over other people. Also, I was bone tired and couldn't be bothered with another argument. "I'd like to go home. We can pick up where we left off tomorrow."

From a whole heap of jack shit. If anything, we'd *lost* momentum. And apparently the *faeries can't lie* rule was a lie itself, because the Lady of the Tree said I could find those children in the factory.

Helpless anger simmered, but tiredness won out and I stumbled towards the door.

"Hold on." Vance barred the way again. He leaned slightly forward, close enough I could smell *him* beneath the witch's spell—something unidentifiably masculine. Appealing. Unwanted.

I let out an impatient hiss. "Didn't I say I was done? I'm all out of fucks to give, Vance."

"Please," he said. "If you know anything about the faeries—anything that might solve this case—tell me. You can trust I won't spread the information. Part of my position is as a confidant to all mages, and I'll extend that courtesy to you."

My head throbbed too much to make sense of mages' social niceties. I shrugged. The movement didn't hurt, but my arms were limp. I needed a major blood sugar hit, otherwise I'd pass out. "What do you want to know?"

"If we went to Faerie," he said. "Those cobwebs—the whole room wasn't natural."

"It wasn't Faerie," I said. "Just a spell. Trust me, if there was another way to Faerie open, we'd know. We were in the factory all along."

“The faerie used Summer magic. But what it said to you… it was drawing power? Where does faerie magic come from?”

“Within,” I said. “Usually. Each faerie has a certain amount. Don’t ask me how that’s determined. I haven’t a clue. I know pure faeries, the knights of the courts and nobles, have a shit-ton of magic. Wild creatures like trolls have almost none.”

“He wasn’t a noble.”

“He was an exile,” I said. “I guess they shoved him into the mortal world during the invasion.”

“And the children? How might you have found them in the factory?”

“No idea. The Lady of the Tree said they weren’t in this realm. But the factory wasn’t linked to Faerie. That sad old monster was never going to get back.” And good riddance.

“Could he have opened a way into Faerie?”

“No. If just any faerie could do it, there’d be a second invasion. It hasn’t happened in twenty years.” Not strictly true, but what I’d done didn’t count.

I’d broken through the realms by using the lord’s power in sheer desperation. I didn’t know how.

He watched me, eyes unblinking, and my heart sank. That’s what I got for not rehearsing a cover story.

“You don’t look like a faerie.”

Huh? “I didn’t think I’d be glad to hear you say that.” Oops. There went my filter. “Never mind. I’ve lost a shit-ton of blood and don’t know what I’m saying.”

“You sound pretty coherent to me.” His eyes lingered on the bare skin at my waist, possibly on the pretext of examining the now healed wound. But the spark igniting in his eyes was the opposite of concern. The word *predatory*

came to mind, along with a rush of warmth I couldn't entirely put down to weird aftereffects of blood loss and nearly dying.

His gaze stripped the rest of my clothes from me as surely as though I'd read his thoughts. *Oh.* Heat crept up my neck and I forgot how to speak, even to tell him to look the hell away. The scent of him grew stronger, and I inhaled almost against my will. *You don't get on with predators*.

Tell that to my thumping heart.

All Vance said was, "Will you be able to get home? I can ask someone to give you a lift."

I licked my lips, suddenly overcome with a fresh wave of tiredness. At least, I assumed that's why my legs wanted to fold at the knees.

"Uh. That'd be great. Thanks. By the way, what did you mean by 'shout at some necromancers'?"

"Somebody," he said, his voice dropping on the word, "is going to pay."

I had no doubt about that.

"And Ivy?" His eyes caught mine, captured my gaze like a moth in a sunbeam.

"Yes?"

"Don't ever take a hit on my account again."

I gaped at him. So that was why he hadn't arrested me. Because I'd saved his neck. Mage code, maybe.

Right. Time to go home and lick my wounds, and take on tomorrow when it came. With our leads a bust, we'd have to start again. I was up against the worst of Faerie. No denying it now. But could I drag anyone else into this again?

No, was the obvious answer. I'd go it alone. Never mind Vance. Never mind that he'd believed me, helped me, even. *There won't be a next time.*

Wanda said he had a protective streak. I hadn't believed her, but now I saw it. Oh, boy. This was heading down a dangerous road. I wasn't the type to salivate over a guy who acted like a total shit most of the time. Hell, I normally avoided his type. Just as I did mages.

For my own sake, I needed to get *un* involved with *this* mage, asap. He was a million kinds of trouble, and had come too close to finding the truth.

He watched me leave, arms crossed over his chest. He wasn't smiling, but neither did he look like he wanted to see me dead. I'd put his expression at curiosity, but not in a *look at the freak show human with faerie magic* kind of way. More like he wanted to get to know me. And for the first time, I was okay with that in a way I shouldn't be, considering how close I'd come to exposing my secrets.

We're from different worlds, I told myself. *Besides, he's not the type to stick around*. He'd as good as said he only needed my skills for this investigation. All the mages I'd met until now had been ruthless and self-centred with little regard for anyone below their own social status. And I'd always been more than happy to remain at the bottom of the heap. Invisible.

Safe.

Vance Colton was already too involved with my professional life. I didn't need him to shove his way into my personal life as well.

So I turned my back on the Mage Lord, and closed the door behind me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

By the time I got home, I wasn't tired any more. I was pissed off. I slammed the door open, making Isabel jump out of the armchair she sat in.

"What happened this time?" Her eyes widened at the sight of my tattered, bloodstained clothes.

"Fucking faeries." I stormed past into my bedroom, tossed my jacket onto a chair and stripped off the ruins of my T-shirt. Grabbing a fresh outfit, I made for the shower. The warm water somewhat calmed me, but the amount of blood streaming from my side reminded me just how close I'd come to dying. Because of the faeries, and because my self-preservation had run for the hills and made me jump between the Mage Lord and a knife.

I shuddered, switching off the shower and watching the pinkish water disappear. I needed to get a grip, both on my own life and on the case. Next time a faerie gave me an address, I'd set the place on fire first.

Not that we'd have been able to track that faerie anyway, considering life-form detecting spells didn't work on it.

Not immortal, huh. Usually, the only way to kill a pure faerie was to take away its power source. But to that creature, its power had come *from* Faerie.

Trapped here, it'd wither and die like the Lady of the Tree. Really, I'd put it out of its misery.

I wished I'd done the same to the evil old bitch in the forest. Worse, I owed her a favour now. *Or maybe not.* I'd promised her the favour in exchange for useful information, and what she'd told me had been a total lie. That's what I got for trusting faeries to keep their word.

Isabel raised an eyebrow when I stomped back into the living room. "I haven't seen you this mad since Erwin ate the last cookie."

On cue, the piskie zoomed overhead, shrieking about bad faeries.

"Bad faeries is right," I said. "This is an epic clusterfuck like you won't believe." I lay down on the sofa and gave her a rundown of the last twenty-four hours. It sounded even worse admitting aloud that I'd failed twice over and almost got killed. And I hadn't told Swanson the latest, either.

"So in summary, the whole universe is crashing around my ears." The microwave dinged, reminding me of shoved a pasta meal in there. I pushed myself up off the sofa and went in search of sustenance.

"I can brew something to help with the blood loss," said Isabel.

"That'd be awesome." I rubbed my forehead. "Erwin *didn't* steal the last cookie, did he?"

"Luckily, no."

"First piece of good news I've had all day." Nothing, not even all the denizens of Faerie, would stand between me and Isabel's heavenly cookies.

"Well, this is definitely worse than the hydra case," Isabel said.

"Tell me about it." I returned to the sofa with my meal. "At least then I had a clear target. None of our tracking spells worked, and faeries are all lying

bastards.”

I dug into the pasta, shoving cheese-coated goodness into my mouth.

Damn, I was starving.

Isabel moved some of the bits of discarded spell from the coffee table and took out her go-to handbook for herbs and potions.

“Maybe the Lady of the Tree didn’t mean it literally when she said you could find the children at the factory.” Isabel’s brows pinched together the way they did when she was thinking hard. “Maybe she meant it was possible for you to find them from there, somehow.”

“She as good as said they were in Faerie.” I clenched my fists, wanting to scream. I’d failed in the worst way possible. I’d doomed two teenagers to the hellishness I’d suffered myself. I poked moodily at the meal, no longer hungry. Small mercy that the Lady of the Tree didn’t know my address, so I wouldn’t be dragged from bed in the middle of the night and forced to march through a swamp in search of a missing artefact. Some faeries didn’t get the memo that this was real life, not a storybook.

“Need a healing charm?” asked Isabel. “Looks like you took a real hit back there.”

I’d been through worse, but never from throwing myself between a mage and a knife before. I didn’t even know how to explain why I’d done it.

Instinct. Stupidity. Whatever.

“I wouldn’t mind getting rid of some of these bruises.” Now the pain from my side had gone, my body decided to remind me I’d been used as a punching bag by a bunch of tree roots.

Rather than applying a healing salve to each individual bruise, I opted for the spell circle. Once I’d set up the circle—this one a purple band-shape—I stepped inside and a cool sensation washed over me like I’d jumped into wonderfully cold water at the end of a scorching day.

At once I felt fully re-energised, like I'd plugged myself into the witch equivalent of an electrical outlet. The circle flared along the edges, then went out. I stepped out, too, and helped Isabel clear the spell's burned remains away.

"Much better," I said. "About those cookies…"

"In the fridge. What now?"

"I'm supposed to recover, then tell Swanson I failed to find his kid." But could I really tell him what the Lady of the Tree said—that it was too late, and Faerie already had him in its clutches? With the return of my energy came anger, helpless rage at the monsters who ruined human lives for kicks.

There might be no motive. This might not be part of a bigger plan.

Vance seemed to think it was.

Isabel's arms folded around me. "Hey—you'll be fine. You've got out of worse scrapes. Don't count this as a lost cause yet."

My throat closed up with unsaid words. I'd been a lost cause, yet I'd escaped. Most humans couldn't survive it. Luck alone had saved me.

"I'll try," I said. "The kids are in *Faerie*, though. No getting around that."

"Summer or Winter?"

"No clue." *Neither*.

I didn't deserve her relentless efforts to help. And my excuses for keeping quiet about Faerie had shrunk to almost nothing. It was selfish and cowardly of me to carry on lying to my best friend.

Especially when I knew for certain the exiles were involved.

More to the point, what the hell was I supposed to do about Vance Colton? He knew too much. More even than Isabel did. If he found out any more, I'd no longer be able to lie. And then what? No good could come of it.

Quite apart from the fact that I'd happily live out my life without anyone ever knowing my experiences with the faeries.

Isabel released me, and I walked into the kitchen to retrieve the cookies.

"Remind me of the difference between Summer and Winter again? Seems like they're equally evil."

"Pretty much," I said, sitting back on the sofa and taking a bite of cinnamon-flavoured awesomeness. "Summer feeds on life and involves making things grow, while Winter feeds on death and involves freezing everything in sight. Normally they can't use their power here unless commanded to—like in the invasion, it was pretty much a free-for-all—but exiles like that one in the factory aren't bound by the usual rules."

"And it's one of the exiles who took the kids, right?" She propped her feet up on the coffee table.

"Has to be, but if I'm to believe the Lady of the Tree, they're already lost." I sank back onto the sofa again. "I can't do this on my own."

"You're not alone," said Isabel. "You're working with the best witches in the district, remember? I've got the whole coven involved. They managed to get something from the crime scene at the necromancer family's house.

Where the changeling went missing. One of the other witches is friends with the Climes family. She found traces of the changeling at the scene."

I sat bolt upright. "What? DNA for a tracking spell?"

"Told you we were awesome." She grinned.

Yes. I laughed shakily. "You might have just saved the day, Isabel."

"I do my best. Actually, I can't take credit for this one, but I *do* have DNA from the changeling right here."

"God. Thank you." I leaned back in relief, closing my eyes. We weren't out of the game yet. "Does your friend have any ideas why that family was

targeted?”

“No clue,” she said. “I thought there might be a connection between the two, but they picked a human living in mage territory and a necromancer’s kid. Doesn’t really form a pattern, unless they were trying to make all the local supernaturals blame one another.”

I shook my head. “Maybe they’re banking on the necromancers taking offence at being blamed.”

I couldn’t for the life of me figure out the link, either. Unless faeries were just totally batshit. Which was enough of an explanation in itself.

My phone buzzed. “Oh crap.” I grabbed it and saw a new message.

“If you’ve recovered, I’m coming over to your house now.”

“He’s coming over now. Shit. This place looks like a tornado hit it.”

Damn. I wasn’t mentally prepared to have the Mage Lord in my house. So much for giving me time to recover.

“Wait, who’s coming over?”

“Vance Colton.”

“Holy shit.” Her eyes bugged out.

“I know, right?” I groaned.

“Wow.” She didn’t look as concerned about the mess as I was. “I never got to talk to him last time.”

“You don’t want to.” Kinda harsh, but he might have given me a break.

Then again, maybe he had more information. Or a new lead.

“Is he that bad?”

“Stuck-up. Snobbish. Standard mage.” I paced around the sofa with my phone in hand. “He thinks only of himself and can’t speak a word without ordering people around.”

“You’re fidgeting,” said Isabel. “You always do that when you’re nervous.”

“Hell, yes, I’m nervous. The Mage Lord’s used to swimming in luxury.

This place is practically a troll’s nest to him.”

“Since when did you care?” She snorted. “Is he attractive? They say he is.”

Yes. Very. I shrugged.

“Aha.” Her eyes gleamed. “So that’s why you’ve been spending so much time at his house.”

“Are you forgetting he coerced me into working for him?” I shot her a warning look. “He’s rude, overbearing and terrifying.”

“And smoking hot, from what I’ve heard.” She flashed me a grin. “I said you needed to get out more. You haven’t dated in months.”

“Because the last time worked out so well.” I’d made the mistake of inviting the guy over here, and Erwin the piskie decided to make a nest in his hair. My romantic life was even unluckier than my professional one.

Well. Right now, maybe not. ‘Nonexistent’ was a better word.

“I warned you,” said Isabel. “Regular humans don’t get what we do. You need someone who’s in the know about this.” She indicated the general spell-strewn mess of the seating area.

“I need a drink, not a date.” My phone buzzed again and I swore. “He’s on the way.”

“Excellent.”

I flicked a piece of discarded spell at her. “We almost died. Twice. That’s probably what he wants to talk about.”

That sobered her up. “Do you really think we should clean the flat?”

I looked around. “Never mind. It’s not worth it. If this place is good enough for clients, it’s good enough for His Pretentiousness."

She snorted. I, however, felt an inexplicable twinge of guilt. He’d helped me. More than once. He could be a dick sometimes, but then, so could I.

Before I could gather my thoughts together, the doorbell rang. Of course he’d have used his space-bending power to come here in five seconds flat.

I walked to the door and opened it to find Vance standing there in full Mage Lord gear, cloak and all.

“You must be Isabel,” he said to her over my shoulder.

I tensed, but she smiled and accepted his handshake. “Hi. You’re… Lord Colton? Sir?”

“Either.”

So much for leaving his pretentious attitude behind.

“Vance,” I said pointedly, but he reacted like I hadn’t spoken. “We were discussing how you volunteered to help me deal with this particularly difficult case.”

“I see.” For a moment, I thought I’d pushed too far. Then he smirked.

“Did you include the part where I saved you from bleeding to death?”

Oh, he had to go there. “And the part where you got buried in a spider web?”

Isabel’s eyes bugged out. Her face said, *I didn’t know you were on such familiar terms.*

“I asked the necromancers about the factory, since we encountered undead there,” he said, snapping back into professional mode. “He said nobody’s raised anything recently. But undead can’t survive in the state we found them in for long. Days at most.”

“Then he’s lying,” I said. With the whole *nearly bleeding to death* thing, I’d forgotten about the zombies.

“I agree, and that’s why I’ve sent people to follow him,” said Vance, surprising me.

“But why would a necromancer be involved with the faeries?”

That made zero sense. It was as unlikely as a troll joining a community project.

“I intend to find out,” said Vance. “As for the necromancers, we will be meeting with them after their monthly summit tomorrow. That should give me the opportunity to find out if anyone has been dealing in forbidden magic.”

“The necromancers are supposed to stop that from happening,” said Isabel. “They protect the veil. If they’ve gone rogue, they’re supposed to be

expelled from the Guild. It’s in their sacred oath.”

“Clearly not sacred, then,” I said.

“No, it’s true,” said Vance. “After the war, the necromancers had to do more than the Mage Lords to clear up the aftermath. I believe it’s the only time they’ve taken on any responsibility.”

Sounded about right.

“By sealing all the spirits who died in the invasion, according to someone I asked,” said Isabel. “I’ll give you two some peace, okay? I need to tidy away this spell.” She moved to start clearing the floor.

“Every necromancer in the region is a member of the Guild, right?” I asked Vance. “What about half-necromancers? Do they always have the gift?”

“Sometimes,” said Vance. “It doesn’t tend to be dominant in family lines, unlike the blood of a mage.”

“Hmm. Still has nothing to do with faeries, though. Unless… I don’t know. Winter magic feeds on death, and necromancers have no shortage of corpses, but… I can’t see the connection.”

“Especially as faeries are immortal,” Vance reminded me. “But the Lady of the Tree said she wanted her immortality back.”

“From Faerie,” I said. “They wouldn’t need a necromancer. I don’t think even *they* can stop someone from dying permanently.”

“Exactly.” He frowned. “I have mages patrolling every inch of necromancer territory, looking out for trouble. They’re not happy with me.”

“Tough shit,” I said. “Should’ve thought of that before they made everyone suspect them.”

“They care nothing for their reputation,” said Vance. “As for the half-blood faeries, *they* refused to allow me to send anyone into their territory.”

“Be glad they did. I nearly got eaten by a kelpie when I went in there.”

“Can half-bloods lie? I know pure faeries can’t.”

“Yeah, they can. They aren’t bound by Faerie’s rules here. Even the Lady of the Tree lied to us. Unless we seriously misinterpreted the words. *You can find the children there.*… but she also said they weren’t in this realm anymore. Which is impossible.”

How could someone have opened a way to Faerie without magic along the Ley Line going haywire?

Vance studied me. “You think someone opened a door back to Faerie.”

“I can’t think of another way to interpret her words,” I said. “But—it’s impossible. Faerie magic alone isn’t enough to open a way back. The half-bloods dream of escaping this realm, but they can’t. The invasion was the only time anyone’s done it.”

“Summer and Winter each opened a gate along the Ley line, is my understanding.” Vance’s phone buzzed. “I’ll answer this.”

He stood, pressing the phone to his ear. “What happened?” he asked the person on the other end.

From his tone, I could tell this wasn’t a friendly social call.

“I have to leave.” He switched his phone off. “Two of my mages disappeared near the factory.”

My heart plummeted. “Damn.”

“Don’t leave the house.”

Before I could blink, he’d strode to the door, opened it and vanished. I turned to Isabel in disbelief. She didn’t look shocked, so she couldn’t have seen him disappear into thin air.

“Don’t leave the house. Unbelievable.” I stared after him, but he didn’t come back.

“Well, he said two people did go missing.”

I sank onto the sofa. “Two miles away. I’m not going to ground myself because he said so.”

“What you said about the Ley Line got me thinking,” she said. “I might be able to mark it on a map. That factory… it’s outside the town, right?”

I nodded.

Isabel walked over and reached behind the sofa, pulling out a dusty map.

“We used this in our first coven meeting. It marks all the key points.”

“Key points?”

“Places on the line where magic is particularly strong.” She unfurled the map and placed a paperweight on top of it to hold it still. “The first thing I

learned when I joined the coven was not to attempt a spell at a key point.

Magic’s too potent there. And there’s something in the necromancy code, too. I think the veil’s particularly thin there.” She indicated several spots on the line across the centre of the page.

“So spirits can cross over easier there?” I paused. “Faerie magic’s stronger at those points, too. That’s got to be our connection. I’ll tell Vance

__”

A crashing noise made me jump. Erwin the piskie flew through the room, shrieking. “Bad faerie!”

“What the hell?”

Isabel leaped to her feet. “Someone’s attacking our wards.”

I joined her, grabbing my sword. Damn. I hadn’t left a trail of blood outside, had I?

Underneath the window, a sudden blast of fire scorched the flowerbeds near the ward line.

“Whoa,” I said.

“Hey!” Isabel shouted. “Those are rare herbs, you bastard.”

And she grabbed a handful of spells from the table, activating one with a swift movement. Purple light spilled out and enveloped the room, accompanied by a tremendous bang like a firework. High-pitched screams

reached my ears, and several tall, twig-like figures appeared outside the window.

I *knew* it was the faeries.

Fire imps are an anomaly. Summer doesn't like them because they're deadly to all plant life. Winter, the land of ice, isn't terribly enamoured with them either. I'm not sure where they came from—hell, maybe they were in the grey area of Faerie before the exiles. Nobody ever handed me a definitive guide to Faerie. I had to figure out most of it on my own.

But none of them had ever attacked me at home before. I took pains to make sure that never happened. Ever.

I struck out for the door, Irene in one hand and one of Isabel's explosive spells in the other. Those particular spells were reserved for the two of us, on the reasonable grounds that most non magic users did a good job running

into magical accidents without having access to the witch equivalent of a firework.

Sharp little hands stabbed at me the instant I opened the door. I sliced with my blade, decapitating the fire imp. How the hell did it get so close to the house with so many wards active?

Fire sparked all over the lawn, burning holes in the grass, and I dodged a ball of whirling flame. Isabel leaped up and threw a counter-spell, a wave of water that drenched both of us. The imps scrambled back, dripping wet, baring their teeth.

Another flowerbed went up in flames, and Isabel just about lost her shit.

She threw an explosive spell at three of the imps. Bits of twig flew everywhere, and I had exactly five seconds of total astonishment at her aggressiveness before an imp landed on my head, hands stabbing at my eyes.

“Fuck off,” I snarled, grabbing at it. With the faerie dangling from my hand, I cut its throat with my blade. I tossed it aside, pushing my now sopping wet ponytail aside.

Two more imps appeared from the shadows and threw fire at us. The ward just in front of the house, which was supposed to activate in defence, remained dead. Isabel’s eyes went wide.

As for me, I called the faerie magic.

I leaped in front of Isabel, blue light flaring around my non-sword-hand.

The light spread, forming a barrier, and the fire harmlessly glanced off the blue shield now surrounding both of us. *You don’t get to hurt her.* I’d kill them all first.

I joined Isabel in hurling another explosive at the faeries. They scattered, screaming, and I ran at them, the faerie magic making my reactions much faster than usual. Fast enough to catch every one. I flung a final explosive at the last imp as it reached the gate, and the resulting blast knocked into the ward at the fence with a ringing noise. *That* one still functioned. But what had stopped the others working?

Isabel walked over to me. “Whoa. You’re fast. I didn’t see you grab a speed enhancer.”

I said nothing, a heavy measure of guilt settling over me, that Vance Colton knew more about my abilities than Isabel did. Not only that, they’d attacked our home. Even set the garden on fire. *Bloody faeries.* Next time, I’d make damn sure there were more than wards outside to stop them. Not to mention the iron… which, now I looked, had disappeared. Like someone had deactivated it. I stared.

“How the hell did they know where to find me?” I asked aloud, though I could guess. I’d made enough enemies over the years. This, however, felt—

recent. Calculated. “And who took out our defences?” I walked over to the place where a ring of iron had circled the garden. Sure, it *might* have been

the landlord, but…

“No clue.” Isabel bent over the now-defunct ward. “I can use a tracking spell and see if anyone’s messed with this.”

“Good idea.”

We returned to the house, trepidation building by the second. Only a powerful magic user could deactivate a ward, and we only used the best.

Nothing was a perfect defence, of course—especially against the faeries.

But fire imps were stupid. They couldn’t have taken the wards down themselves.

Isabel picked up one of the tracking spells from the coffee table and took it outside. I stood by the gate, watching the road, as she activated it by the ward. A circle spread out and lines appeared within, a series of glyphs in blue light.

Isabel swore as the light gleamed on her arms. “I don’t believe it.”

“Who was it?”

“Larsen,” she said. “The trail leads back to the mercenary guild.”

My boss. He’d tried to kill us.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I wanted to confront Larsen alone first thing the next morning, but as per usual, Vance Colton put a wrench in my plans. I woke to a rapping on the door and groaned as the impact of the past twenty-four hours hit me like a rampaging troll.

“All right, all right!” I snapped at no one in particular as the house shook under another knock. I dressed in ten seconds and grabbed my sword in case another faerie contingent arrived to attack me. “Chill the hell out, Vance.”

“When did you end up on first name terms, anyway?” asked Isabel, passing by with a mug of steaming hot chocolate in her hands.

“When we both nearly died,” I said. I wasn’t mentally present today.

Small wonder when my boss had tried to kill me. And I had no idea why.

All my phone calls went through to voicemail. I’d planned to storm over there today, but not hiding behind Lord Colton.

“What is it?” I asked as I opened the front door.

“Not a morning person?” Vance was as unruffled as ever, while I both looked and felt like shit. I’d taken a fair beating yesterday. Even the healing spell hadn’t got rid of all my bruises. And I’d stayed up late trying to get

through to Larsen and helping Isabel set up more tracking spells to find the changeling.

“A bunch of faeries tried to torch my house,” I said. “Knocked the wards out. You didn’t see anything odd outside yesterday, did you?”

He frowned. “No. Who did it?”

I hesitated. He knew too much already. The last thing I needed was to give him more ammunition. More reasons to depend on him. I glanced over my shoulder to find Isabel had retreated into her room, leaving me alone with Vance. Traitor.

“Fire imps got my address somehow.” I evaded the question. “They torched Isabel’s flowerbeds. Did you find those two mages?”

“No.”

Funny how he could pack so much meaning into one word. Specifically, *No, but I’m going to find who’s responsible and eviscerate them.*

“You could have come to me,” I said. “We have a dozen new tracking spells ready.”

“Something in the faeries’ magic is blocking them,” he said. “Every one.

We’ve already requested help from the coven and found nothing.”

“Seriously?” *Dammit.* “Isabel and I have DNA from the second changeling, from the necromancer family’s house. We were going to track it down.”

“You planned to use the tracking spell now?” He looked over my shoulder into the flat.

Oh, all right. “You can come in, but we’re not activating anything in here.” My heartbeat quickened inexplicably as he followed me inside. The flat looked even worse than yesterday, if possible.

Vance raised his eyebrows at the sight of a dozen spell circles set up on the floor surrounded by various spell ingredients. “What’s this about?”

“Tripwires,” I said. “I’d watch your footing in here. We’re making anti-faerie defences for the flat. I was thinking of something that makes their testicles fall off.”

“Wouldn’t just killing them be a deterrent to the others?”

I smirked. “That wouldn’t leave anyone alive to tell tales, would it?”

“You’re more vindictive than I gave you credit for,” he said. “What’s that?” He indicated the map I’d left out on the table.

“A possible connection. We might have a theory on the pattern of the disappearances.”

“Show me.”

“Still forgetting to say ‘please’?”

“Two of my people are missing,” he said, his jaw tight with anger. He leaned over the map and studied it. “The Ley Line. The factory lies over a key point.”

“You know about those?”

“Of course. Doesn’t the Ley Line give you the ability to use magic?

That’s how it goes for witches.”

I didn’t miss the accusation in his tone. A reminder of the lies I’d told him.

“I guess. I’ve never been away from it, so I wouldn’t know. It doesn’t give you *your* power, right?” That’s why I’d thought he didn’t know. Mages

were the only magic users who could use their ability whether they were near a Ley Line or not.

“No, but I find it useful to keep track.” He pointed to the factory on the map. “Like this. A key point is a place where enough energy can be hidden that even the necromancers couldn’t tell someone was summoning the dead.”

“And… and hiding someone from a tracking spell?”

“Perhaps,” he said. “My plan is to take a team over there today to search for my people.”

“And what the Lady of the Tree said? She implied someone could have opened a gateway to Faerie right there. I didn’t think it was possible, but if you can hide someone…”

Could the children have been there in the factory the whole time? The Lady had said they’d already left this realm…

My phone went off. Larsen. Of all the timing. “My boss is calling me.”

“Make it quick,” he said. “We’re leaving now."

“Might not have a choice,” I muttered.

Vance clearly wasn’t going anywhere. I moved away from him, phone in hand. “Larsen.” I didn’t quite succeed at packing the word with menace the way Vance could.

“Your changelings escaped,” said Larsen, his voice practically vibrating with anger.

“I know,” I said. “Somebody sent fire imps after me and moved the protective wards outside my house. Know anything about that?”

A pause. “Bring those changelings in tomorrow, Ivy, or you’ll regret it.”

And he hung up. I stared in disbelief. “Fuck me sideways.”

Vance raised an eyebrow. “What happened?”

“My boss blamed me for the changelings,” I said. And apparently overreacted like hell. He’d set the faeries on me for this? “I’m in the shit if I don’t catch them.”

“That’s what you planned to do with the tracking spell?”

“Yeah.” I groaned. “Do you want to take one of the others? You can go after your people and I’ll deal with this.” Finally, an ironclad excuse to get rid of him.

So why did the idea of heading after the changelings without Vance being there fill me with trepidation? I worked alone. That’s how I operated best.

Vance studied me. “I can send someone to assist you, if you like.”

I shook my head. “I’ll be fine with Isabel.”

Vance gave me a long look I couldn’t read, then swept off.

Isabel and I set up the tracking spell outside the house this time, not willing to turn the place into Faerie Central again.

“Did he have any theories?” she asked, walking around the circle. It’d burn a hole in the lawn, but I’d rather that than burn a hole in the carpet instead. The lawn was wrecked anyway, thanks to those fire imps.

“Only that the energies around the key point on the Ley Line might have been hiding his missing people,” I said. “The Ley Line must be the connecting factor. It boosts necromancers’ powers, too, and faeries and half-bloods can’t *survive* away from it.”

It had to be the place to open a gate into Faerie. But was that the faeries’

plan? If the children were in Faerie already, it didn’t sound like opening a

door there was their ultimate aim.

Unless they'd set their sights on bigger things. Like bringing every faerie from the Grey Vale to Earth.

Enough paranoia, Ivy. First things first.

The lines of the spell circle flared up and Isabel stepped forward, hands outstretched. A frown puckered her forehead as blue light danced up and down her arms. Then she moved back.

"That can't be right," she said. "The spell says the changeling's just around the corner from here."

I stared a moment. "Are you sure?"

"The spells never lie."

"Great." I drew in a breath. "Better get ready for another fight."

"I'll make sure the wards are functioning," she said. "There are some nasty tripwires if Larsen comes back."

"Well, that's something," I muttered, going back inside. Weapons. I needed weapons, and offensive spells ready for battle. If this was another trap, I'd be prepared this time. I'd rather take out the threat before anything else tried to torch our house.

"You ready?" I asked Isabel, sheathing two more daggers at my waist. "If I ever find out how the faeries got our address, I'll kill whoever gave it out."

"Same here," said my normally chilled out best friend, who wielded an impressive collection of explosive spells. She slid on two more armbands, both for protection, and joined me at the door.

Once outside the flat, I immediately spotted the blue light flaring like a beacon from behind the house on the road's corner.

"Damn. Your spell was right."

I ran ahead, readying Irene. The blood of last night's imps had barely dried and the blade gleamed wickedly as I prepared to fight whatever Faerie threw at us this time.

I'd kill Larsen. If not for him, the faeries wouldn't have found out my address.

A familiar smell slapped me in the face. Decay. Death. Faerie blood.

Dread wrapped itself around my body like a net choking the life from me.

My legs locked into place, my skin going clammy. *No. Not here.*

"Ivy?" Isabel waved a hand in front of my face.

"Hang on," I croaked. "Let me go first."

She gave me an odd look, but apparently my expression convinced her. I moved in front, pushing my legs to walk as normal. My whole body tensed at the sight of blood spattering the pavement.

The first body lay by a parked car. The changeling had been torn in two, its pointed teeth hanging from its gaping mouth. Blood dripped over the pavement's edge into the road.

Isabel swore. "Someone else got here first."

"No kidding." I made myself step forward. The other two changelings'

bodies lay beside a five pointed star roughly chalked onto the road.

"Oh fuck," I said.

As though in response to my words, the star's edges lit up in blue and a giant furry body leaped out, landing on four giant paws. Its huge head swept to either side. Sniffing out human prey.

"Oi," I yelled. "Over here, you great hairy bastard."

I had an explosive spell at the ready, but the hellhound leaped into the air before I could throw it. I took up my blade instead, slicing across the dog's thick hide. Blood spilled out, but not enough. I lunged for the throat and felt it give way, crimson spattering the road.

"Ivy, run!" yelled Isabel.

The explosive spell flew past my face towards three other hellhounds which had materialised in the road. The spell had begun to spark already, ready to deliver some serious pain.

"Run!"

Wisely, I ran, as the spell detonated with the force of a firework. Not only did it send the hellhounds flying back, it blew an impressive chunk out of the tarmac, too. The summoning circle disappeared beneath, blue lights swallowed up in smoke. I blinked, trying to see through the haze. Bloody pieces of hellhound littered the road. Had she got them all?

Isabel screamed. I whirled around and the stinking breath of a hellhound hit my face. Teeth snapped inches from my nose, and I brought the sword up, slicing its forehead open. As I swung my blade, a blast of icy fear froze the breath in my lungs.

The hellhound snarled. My body locked up, breath coming in sharp gasps, throat going dry. Isabel made a choked sound and dropped to the pavement, shaking all over. She'd never been hit by a fear spell before.

But I had. Rage rose inside me . *Oh no*. I was not going to let these blasted faeries control me again. Or hurt Isabel. No way in hell.

Blue light flared from my hands, pushing against the wave of fear. I inhaled, icy air filling my lungs, and shoved back, blue tendrils of light swirling into patterns and filling me with a fresh wave of strength. I flung myself at the hellhound, my knife carving bloody furrows in its face until it plunged into the beast's eye.

The hellhound fell.

The road lay quiet, but the carnage remained. Clean-up were going to have a situation on their hands.

“I’m getting the impression someone’s fucking with me,” I said.

“No kidding.” Isabel limped over, wincing. “I think one of them bit me.”

Shit. Faerie dog bites could be poisonous. “Come on. You need a healing spell. We’ll leave this for Larsen to clear up.”

Unless he’d caused it. The changelings were dead. Had he sent me after them on purpose? Considering he’d almost got me killed once already, maybe I wasn’t being paranoid.

Right. I’d help Isabel first, then go after my soon to be ex-boss.

As the smoke cleared, a blue pinprick of light showed me Isabel’s tracker spell, discarded on the ground.

“Hang on.” I crouched down beside it. “This thing’s still active.”

Without stopping to think, I held my hand over it and let the hellhound’s viscous blood dribble into the spell circle. Fresh blue tendrils of light fanned out from the spell to my hands, and images drifted into my head.

Familiar images, of a place I’d seen recently. A graveyard behind a fence.

“They came from the necromancers’ headquarters,” I said.

“What?” Isabel stared, then stumbled, her face chalk white. Blood seeped down her leg, red tinted blue from faerie blood.

“Never mind. Let’s get you out of here.”

My heart beat a steady rhythm in my ears. *They’ll pay for this. I’ll kill them.*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Isabel looked like living death by the time I'd helped her back into the house and onto the sofa. Worry fluttered in my chest, tempering my growing fury at the necromancers. And Larsen.

My hands shook as I knocked spells everywhere in an attempt to find the first aid kit on the side table. We always kept it well stocked and within easy reach, but I'd never treated hellhound poison before.

"This one," said Isabel, grabbing at a small bottle. Her skin had gone so pale, it was almost translucent, veins standing out on her hands.

I grabbed the bottle and applied the salve to the puncture wounds on the side of her leg.

"Why didn't you tell me it bit you?"

"Because another one was trying to eat your face at the time," said Isabel shakily. "Everything's gone blue."

“Oh, shit.” That probably wasn’t a good sign.

Isabel giggled. “You’re blue, Ivy.”

“Try to hang on.” I set the salve down. The wounds still looked an angry red colour, and blood continued to ooze, though it began to clot. I set up a

healing circle next, snapping the spell around the sofa, while Isabel snickered to herself.

“Blue, everywhere. You look like one of those half-bloods.”

I shivered. Could she temporarily have the Sight? I’d heard of it happening, but I’d thought the faeries’ poison was gone. Some of the colour had come back into her face, anyway.

It’s fine. It’ll be fine. I’d done everything I could. Once she was back to her usual self, Isabel was the healing expert. She’d always taken care of me, not the other way around.

I waited until the wounds closed before I leaned over and whispered, “I’m going to make sure we haven’t left a trail outside. I don’t want anything else coming after us.”

Isabel didn’t respond. Her head lolled against a cushion, but her pulse was steady, so she must have fallen asleep. I felt like I betrayed her to leave, but I had to make sure the hellhounds were really gone.

I set up extra wards around the house, both inside and outside. Then I walked down the road. At the sight of a familiar crowd gathering, I paused.

Larsen’s clean-up crew were here.

“Hey,” I said to one of them. “Those changelings—Larsen asked me to bring them in.”

“I got here first,” said a surly-looking mercenary. Gregor. Bastard always wanted to take credit for other people’s work.

“Larsen ordered me to bring the changelings in.”

“So? That’s your problem.” He squared up to me. “Larsen said you’re in league with the faeries.”

What? “Larsen’s deluded.” *He also tried to have me killed.*

“Should say that to his face.”

“Oh, I plan to,” I said. “But those changelings are my responsibility.

Larsen specifically requested I be the one to—”

I stepped back as he pulled a knife out. “This is my kill.”

“What, you killed them?”

He snorted. “No. But Larsen won’t know any better.”

“They were killed by—” I stopped. I didn’t actually know who’d killed them. Whoever summoned the hellhounds. “He asked for them alive, not dead, so feel free to lie if it makes you feel better.” I gave his knife a cool look. I didn’t care how many kills he had: he didn’t scare me.

“Watch what you say,” said the merc. “Otherwise there’ll be worse than fire imps torching your place.”

What? “How the hell did you know?”

His face said it all.

“Larsen told you. Were you the one who threw away my iron barrier, moved my ward spells and sent those fire imps after me?”

I pulled out my own blade, vaguely aware we’d drawn an audience. I didn’t care. The more people knew what Larsen had done, the better.

“No. I don’t work with the faeries.”

“Larsen asked you to do it.”

“Larsen? No.” He shook his head. “He didn’t. Some new client did. I don’t think Larsen even knew what he’d asked us to do.”

“Asked… what? A new client wanted you to take my wards down?”

The faeries. Hell, might even have been a half-blood. Of course Larsen didn’t bother vetting all his clients.

“The guy offered a bonus to anyone who could get past them and leave a message on your doorstep.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “I didn’t get any message. He was trying to knock out my security. Who the hell was he?”

“Some half-faerie.”

“I knew it.”

The merc cringed as my blade knocked against the bare skin of his neck.

“Don’t you touch me with that.”

“You nearly got my friend and me killed,” I said. “And you can tell Larsen exactly why I won’t be working for him again. If I see you near my house, there’s a dozen magical tripwires set to make your balls shrivel up and fall off.”

The guy winced. “I get it, I get it.”

“No, you don’t.” I lowered my blade. “You blindly follow client orders, don’t you? What did the half-faerie look like?”

“Silver hair. He carried a blade… not like a metal sword. Like wood.”

Ash. A shiver ran up my spine. Alain used the same description…

“Anything else?”

“No.”

I cursed. “Dammit. Right. I have to be somewhere else. Don’t go near my house if you want to keep your sensitive anatomy where it’s supposed to be.”

He gaped after me as I stormed away. Fucking mercenaries.

Fuming, I turned my attention to the image from the last tracking spell. It was time to take out my anger on the necromancers.

I pulled the tracking spell from my pocket. I’d left it active though the spell itself had shrunk to a palm-sized band again. When I slipped it onto my wrist, an image of the tracker’s path came into my head, showing me to the place the hellhounds had come from.

The spell hadn’t lied. My path took me on foot through the same route Vance and I had driven down on the way to necromancer territory last time.

The squat sooty-bricked building looked the same, except a sign adorned the front gate, written in cursive: “Summit in progress. Do not disturb.”

Great.

The tracking spell flared up again. I stopped. It led behind the gate at the building’s side. To the graveyard where the people killed in the invasion were buried.

Oh, crap.

A blue glow surrounded the gate, immediately making my heart sink.

Faerie magic had been used here recently. Walking behind the gate when there might be worse than hellhounds lurking out of sight was an idiot move, but someone clearly wanted to draw my attention. Why else would they send hellhounds right down the road from my house?

I couldn’t expect any help from Larsen. Vance had his own issues to deal with. I was on my own.

I approached the wrought-iron gate, weapons ready. Iron usually kept faeries out, so if any enemy waited, it'd be of the undead variety. Like at the factory.

The gate, however, remained locked. I'd rather not cause any more damage than I had to, so using an explosive spell to blast the doors off wouldn't be a wise move. Instead, I picked the lock using a lock pick I carried for the times Larsen sent me into places I wasn't usually allowed.

Only now did it hit me how much I'd let him control how I spent my time. I took every job, without question.

Not anymore.

I'd worry about my financial future later. Surviving was more important.

As was revenge.

The gate swung open, revealing a fancy headstone with my own name written on it in bright blue. I squinted at the words underneath.

"Watch yourself, human."

"Real original," I said, aloud. "Not to mention disrespecting the dead—"

I stopped. That bright blue colour wasn't ink but something transparent.

Faerie magic.

Only people with the Sight could see it. Someone had left the message for…me. They knew I was Sighted.

How could they know? I'd drawn attention, all right—the worst kind. But why the hell would a faerie have left the message here?

The faeries had invaded our world near here. They'd caused all these people's deaths.

Collateral damage. That's what the official statement had said. The faeries ripped open the Ley Line to save humanity. What did a few thousand casualties matter?

The spell flared up in lines of blue light, illuminating the carved text beneath the message. I squinted to read it.

Swanson was the family name on the grave.

I stared. His family were necromancers? Three generations back, by the look of things. He had necromancer blood. Even though he'd denied having

any magic in his family. Maybe he didn't know. This place *was* totally closed off.

I stared around at the carved headstones like the answers lay beneath the ground. Hell, maybe they did. Even the necromancers rarely disturbed the dead here.

Perhaps unwisely, I moved away from the Swanson family grave and deeper through the rows of headstones. They appeared to have been arranged with the necromancers buried closest to the Guild, but further out, the others who'd died in the invasion must be buried. Including my parents.

And me.

I'd actually seen the headstone before, when I'd paid that necromancer to call my parents. I was listed as one of the dead, as I'd disappeared right as the invasion began. I shoved the memories back, teeth suddenly chattering.

That's why I never came here. No point in walking on my own grave.

"Is anyone here?" I called into the empty spaces between graves.

Unusually for a cemetery, no flowers or other tributes lay anywhere, and little grass grew. It looked abandoned.

Clearly someone was screwing around with me, from here. The tracker ended at the Swanson grave.

I turned that way, and a figure materialised out of thin air.

Shockingly, I jumped, nearly tripping over the nearest grave. The ghost's features were blurred, but not enough that I couldn't see his silvery hair glowed, almost transparent, and his angular features left no doubt what he was.

"Who the hell are you?"

More like 'who were you?' The half-faerie was dead. For me to see it, it meant something was rotten in necromancer land.

"The veil is thin here," whispered the ghost. "It gives you spirit sight you wouldn't normally have."

I'd guessed as much. "You didn't answer my question."

"Who I am is not important."

"You're a half-faerie. And you're dead." Way to state the obvious, Ivy.

"I am."

"Any particular reason you're hanging around here?"

"To make you an offer."

"Of what?"

"Immortality."

"Faerie blood." This must be the connection. Faeries were immortal, but half-bloods could die like the rest of us. They, like others dying in this realm, would want a shot at immortality.

The ghost tilted his head. "You know of it?"

"I'm capable of putting two and two together." I narrowed my eyes. "So you're the one offering immortality to half-faeries and faeries who've been

stranded here since the invasion?”

The half-faerie smirked. “I knew you’d be a good choice.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I glared. “Whatever your interest is in me, you’ve managed to piss me off. You kidnapped part necromancer children, replaced them with changelings, and then killed the changelings and set hellhounds loose near my house. And then you left a trail leading me back here. Big mistake.”

Blue tendrils of smoke wrapped around me, and my hand tightened on my blade. But of course, I couldn’t harm a ghost, with magic or otherwise.

“I’m not the one you should be angry with,” said the half-faerie. “I am no longer part of the world of the living. I’m only an observer. But if you help me, I will give you everything you desire.”

“No, thanks,” I said. “You haven’t said what you need me for.”

“Immortality,” he whispered. “And I can offer the same to you. I can give you the same immortality all true faeries have when the doors to our realm open again. Once *you* open the doors.”

Oh. I gaped at the half-faerie, grasping his plan in one heart-sinking moment.

They needed my magic. Not me. The magic I’d stolen, and used to escape Faerie. They wanted to use that magic to tear open a way back.

“No.” I spoke louder. “No. I won’t. I reject your offer.”

“You’re making a mistake. Faerie blood started this disruption. Faerie blood can end it.”

“Faerie blood started what? I’m not a faerie.”

“No, you’re human.” The half-faerie smiled. “But you’re alive. You’re mortal. And you have our magic.”

And that's why they need me.

Well, shit.

"Who wants to do this? Who's the mastermind?"

"The one who waits between, in the place where the sun never shines. The Grey Vale."

I knew it. I freaking knew it.

Backing away, I watched the half-faerie fade out. And that's when I realised I was stuck in the necromancers' yard with a few thousand bodies surrounding me.

A scratching sound made the hairs rise on the back of my neck. Any noise in an empty cemetery is usually bad news. Sure enough, the noise came from behind a nearby tomb decorated with carvings. No fewer than three pale figures stumbled out, bringing the stench of decomposing flesh.

I snatched up my salt with my free hand before one of them grabbed at me. Hands reached out, grasping, and glassy eyes stared into mine.

Jumping out of range, I swung my sword, decapitating the first one.

Idiotically, it turned out, when its hands continued to grab at me even with its head hanging limply at its side. I beat it aside with the edge of my blade as another two appeared. Every strike had the effect of hitting a rampaging hydra with a water pistol. Nothing could hurt them.

Then a whole line filed out from behind the neighbouring grave, decaying hands grasping, sunken eyes staring.

Damn. These must be higher undead—the type that never stopped no matter how much damage you dealt them. The only way to be rid of them would be with a necromancer's help binding them. Of course, the necromancers—every last one of them—were unhelpfully absent.

Which left me with one person to call.

I threw myself behind the tomb, sprinkling salt in a circle around me. It wouldn’t kill the undead, but would keep them away for a couple of

minutes. Then I grabbed my phone and called the one person I might be able to count on.

“There’s trouble,” I said.

“Of course there is, if you left your house,” said Vance.

“Hilarious,” I said. “Seriously. I’m trapped in the necromancers’ back yard while they’re at their summit, and the dead aren’t staying put.”

“You’re joking.” He paused. “How many?”

“At least a dozen. I don’t have enough salt. I need a necromancer, ideally, but you’ll have to do.”

“How flattering,” he said. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Smoke swirled at my side, and suddenly Vance stood beside me.

“Dramatic, much?”

The undead broke through the circle. A dozen pairs of hands grabbed at me. Vance’s sword appeared at the same time as I swung mine. Three undead fell back then kept coming, some missing arms, all bearing deep slashes that didn’t bleed.

“They won’t die,” I said unnecessarily. “Even when you cut their heads off.”

“In that case…”

He stepped forward and decapitated one of them. Before I could say a word, its head disappeared as it touched the ground, leaving its body to collapse onto its front.

I stared. “You displaced it?”

“Elsewhere within these walls,” he said. “We don’t want them getting outside.”

“Good thinking.”

Really good thinking, actually. I wished I’d thought of it.

At least we had a strategy now. I cut the undead, while Vance displaced their body parts so they couldn’t pull themselves back together. Within a minute, harmless pieces of zombie surrounded us, bloodless and stinking, but mercifully not trying to gouge our eyes out. I gagged a little when a

severed hand attempted to pull itself along the ground, but Vance displaced it before it could grab my ankle.

“Good riddance,” I said.

“How did you end up here?”

Oh, crap. I didn’t want to bring up the ghost. Or its plan. Using *my* magic to open a way back to Faerie. It explained a lot—explained too much. But if I dropped out of this case, nobody would be able to solve it.

Except Vance.

No. He couldn’t fight the faeries. Nobody could.

Pushing aside a fresh wave of guilt, I explained how Isabel and I had fought the hellhounds, and that I’d used the tracking spell to come here.

Guilt over abandoning her replaced the guilt I felt over lying to him. Or at least omitting very important information.

“So you called me.” The hint of a smirk showed on his face.

“I’m not incapable of admitting I’m in over my head. I did find another clue, though. The man buried here—was Swanson’s ancestor. They’re part necromancer.”

His expression turned serious. “Which is significant… why?”

I shrugged. “No idea. I wish I knew. I mean, faeries rarely take anyone for no reason.”

Too late, I realised what I’d said. But he didn’t seem to hear the implied meaning. The faeries had had no reason to take me…not before. The patterns here were beginning to make sense in a way that I didn’t care for.

I opened my mouth then closed it. Hell, I knew lying would come back to hit me, but if he knew I was apparently the cornerstone of the faeries’ plan, he’d—do something to stop me being involved. Like locking me up, or putting me under house arrest. Vance might be skilled, but he wasn’t Sighted. He couldn’t see the full extent of the menace we faced.

“Necromancy,” I said. “It’s not usually associated with faerie magic, but somebody set up that necromantic circle in the Swansons’ house.”

Could necromancy have summoned those hellhounds? The trail did lead back here…

Something told me that was important. But why take children? Even necromancer kids just coming into their power wouldn’t know…

“Hang on,” I said. “Did you find your missing people?”

“I did,” he said. “It seems our friend in the factory had an accomplice.”

“Wait. What? You battled faeries without telling me?”

He tilted his head on one side. “I had the impression you were a tad preoccupied. I wasn’t aware you had a monopoly on all faerie killings in town.”

“Very funny. What happened?”

“We put the faeries down.”

“Good.” One problem down. A million more to go.

“Are you really that bothered you didn’t get to kill the faeries yourself?”

His eyes gleamed with amusement.

I didn’t see anything funny in the situation. I should be home, making sure Isabel was safe.

“Or,” he went on, “are you concerned I can’t cope with a few spider webs without you around?"

Yes. Okay, ‘concerned’ was a strong word. Like hell I’d let on how relieved I’d felt when he’d appeared to take down those zombies. I’d never live it down.

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Not going to thank me for saving your neck again? We ought to keep a tally.”

“I’d be more inclined to be polite to you if you didn’t make a point of acting like an ass every time you bailed me out.”

He raised an eyebrow. “If I hadn’t shown up, you might have joined those poor fools in the ground.”

“I’m aware.”

A pause. “Has it ever occurred to you that you need to think before you go off alone?”

“Frequently.” If he thought I was a reckless idiot, so be it. I couldn’t let anyone else end up in as deep shit with the faeries as I had. “I didn’t realise

I needed to ask for your permission before I did anything. Especially as you’ve been dealing with the faeries by yourself.”

He sighed and brushed some of the dirt from my shoulder. “Just think next time. Please.”

I froze at the surprisingly intimate gesture. His hand moved slowly, deliberately, down the side of my jaw, leaving a trail of goose bumps. I became aware of the sound of my heartbeat, still racing from the battle, and the same masculine scent I'd picked up on before, underneath the decaying smell of the undead. It drew me to him, one step, then another. His fingertips lingered on the side of my jaw, his gaze deep. Not cool, but the kind of warm that preceded a tropical storm. My breath stopped, like my lungs had decided I didn't need oxygen anymore. Two more steps would close the distance between us. One step.

His hand dropped to his side. "You're covered in dirt and your clothes are torn."

Just like that, the spell was broken. "So I can't afford a twenty-four/seven dirt repellent spell like you can. If it's a problem, you don't have to stand in a ten-mile radius of me."

The words snapped out even though I didn't give a shit what he thought of me. I was comfortable in my own skin, dirt, scars and all. But worry for Isabel clawed at my insides, along with a fair helping of guilt that I'd let myself get sucked into whatever the hell magic this guy possessed. Or just post-battle lust. Whatever it was, I wanted it gone. I scooted back a few steps, putting a respectable distance between me and those blasted temperamental eyes.

Vance's brows lifted. "I didn't intend to offend you. But you might want to think about replacing those jeans. They're a tad distracting."

I looked down to find the seams had split down both legs, revealing my dirt-stained legs. Heat flushed my cheeks. "Bloody zombies." Guess I'd taken one fall too many.

He smirked at me. "I'm not complaining."

I stepped back. "You're a total ass, you know that? Also, in case you've forgotten, we're trespassing." And there was a half-faerie ghost somewhere here, probably watching us.

That thought was pretty effective at stopping all wayward ideas of him touching me again. *Oh, shit. The dead are probably laughing at us.*

“Yes,” said Vance. “We are. And this place… nobody should have raised the dead here. The necromancers know better. The energy levels here are unstable.”

“Because of the invasion.”

“Exactly.” He met my eyes. “The purpose of necromancy is to converse with the dead, not raise them. This is no necromancer we face.”

He didn’t know the half of it. I couldn’t tell him the truth. However powerful he might be, the weakest faerie would always triumph over the strongest human. Even a predator. Even the Mage Lord.

Only I, a weak human with faerie magic, might be able to stop them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Even outside the gates to the necromancers' place, the creeping feeling of being watched remained. The autumn chill in the air didn't help, nor did the faint breeze sending tattered leaves skipping by, or the stark lines of the building beside us etched against the pale grey sky. All we needed was darkness and a full moon and we had a serious contender for a horror movie scenario. At least Vance had re-locked the gate to the cemetery. Though if he wanted to confront the necromancers about their out of control zombies, he'd have to admit we'd been trespassing.

I couldn't give an airborne shit-factory what they thought. "Well?" I asked Vance, once he'd hung up the phone and walked back over to me.

"We have an audience with the necromancers tonight," he said. "I'll pick you up at seven."

"It's a date." Then I realised what I'd said.

Vance smirked. "I've had worse propositions."

“It’s a figure of speech.” I turned away, my face heating up. *Nope. Not going there.* “I’m going home to check on Isabel.” I’d texted her but hadn’t received a response. She was probably still asleep, but worry gnawed inside

me all the same. I’d dragged her into danger then ran off. And if Larsen moved the wards around my house again…

It’s not possible. They’re stronger this time.

That faerie—the one with the ash blade, who I’d never seen in person—

had ordered the mercenaries to bring down the wards. Faeries couldn’t counter witch magic themselves, but with Isabel incapacitated, I couldn’t risk leaving her alone a moment longer. With Larsen against me and every half-blood open to the influence of whoever this faerie was, the list of people I could count on had shrank to almost nothing.

I asked Vance to drop me off at the street corner. The ruins of the summoning circle had been cleared away along with the bloody remains of the dead hellhounds, though the stench of faerie blood still hung in the air and clogged my throat. I swallowed bile, imagining all the horrors that’d erupt on our doorstep now the incompetence of the clean-up guild had left a giant neon sign to the faeries behind.

I’d have to clean up the mess myself. But I needed Isabel’s spells to do it.

Worse, now the changelings were dead, we’d lost our leads. They were pure faeries, so once they died, it was forever. They wouldn’t come back as ghosts like the half-faerie. Which meant we had to rely on the necromancers.

I really *hated* relying on those creepy bastards.

Inside the flat, found Isabel still passed out on the couch.

“Isabel?”

I walked over to her, waving my hand in front of her face. No response.

Her pulse beat fainter than before. And she was unconscious this time, not sleeping. Her puncture wounds had turned an angry red despite the healing remedy I'd used.

Shit. Shit.

If her home remedies hadn't worked, the only option was an ambulance. I dialled the number with shaking hands, skipping over Vance's number. No, she needed medical attention, not a mage. Once the call was done, I ran to my room and swiftly changed out of my ruined clothes, but I didn't have the time to take a proper shower before the ambulance showed up. I ran to get the door, pushing my hair over my shoulder. Apparently I looked pretty

scary, because they didn't ask too many questions. I carried Isabel to the door myself, unwilling to invite anyone inside. I didn't dare let down the wards, not now.

Even accompanying her to the hospital, I didn't let my guard down until I heard the words, *she's stable.*

I'd have stayed longer—hell, it tore me apart to leave her—but I had only half an hour before I was due to meet Vance. On the way back, I bought something to eat even though I felt sick. I'd need the energy.

Dead on seven o'clock, Vance appeared on the doorstep. I already stood outside, having locked the door and gathered my weapons ready.

"What happened?" Vance asked. "You're wearing that look."

"What look?"

"The look you get right before you stab someone."

"If this night goes how I expect, I probably will." To my horror, tears pricked at my eyes. "The hellhound bite was poisonous. Isabel's in hospital.

I was too late with the healing spell." I swallowed, eyes watering. I would *not* cry in front of him.

“You could have come to me.”

“Like you can solve everything,” I snapped. “I never said I wanted you to interfere.”

His mouth parted in surprise, but he didn’t respond. Instead, he took my hand—his was warm, burning against mine—and transported us to the road leading to the necromancers’ place.

The necromancers’ leader waited for us outside, as grim-faced as ever.

The door to the cemetery at the side was open, guarded by more black-robed figures.

“Come,” he said, beckoning us behind the gate. He was a man of many words, clearly.

“Hang on,” I said. “You’re taking us back—there?” Where we trespassed?

And where the half-faerie ghost appeared? Had the necromancers seen him? Probably not, if they were inviting us in. If the half-faerie could choose to reveal itself to me, of course it could hide itself from the necromancers.

“This is where we sensed the disturbance in the spirit world,” said the necromancer.

Ordinarily I might have made a joke about disturbances in the Force, but worry for Isabel made my temper fray even thinner than usual.

He stopped just inside the cemetery. “This is where our spirit sight would normally be at its peak. But something’s blocking it. I intend to find out what—and who is responsible.”

Entirely too late, I saw the rows of black-robed figures standing between the graves. It looked like I’d wandered into a secret cult meeting, and I very nearly turned on my heel and hightailed it out of there. Even Vance didn’t look nearly as intimidating as usual, though his hands twitched at his sides like he wanted to grab a weapon.

“So you think there’s a traitor,” he said to the necromancer. “We saw the undead right here.”

Presumably he hadn’t brought up the trespassing, then. I scanned the graves, seeing nobody but the necromancers. The image of that half-faerie laughing at me made my hands clench into fists. I wasn’t scared of ghosts.

Not even the faerie variety.

“And what exactly were you doing here?” The necromancer’s eyes narrowed. “Spying on us?”

“You promised us an audience.”

“After our summit,” he said.

“And do you sense anything weird here?” I asked, unable to help myself.

After all, being able to sense the spirit world was the very definition of a necromancer.

“No. As I said: our vision is clouded.”

Several necromancers brought candles out to place at intervals on a blank stretch of grass in front of the graves.

“Looks more like a séance than a summit,” I muttered to Vance, who grunted. His eyes were fixed on the growing circle of candles, his hands clenching and unclenching. My skin crawled as the candles lit simultaneously of their own accord, the necromancers standing at a distance. All of them had their hoods up. It was like a Death Eater conference. I bit down on the wild giggle rising in my throat.

Only the lead necromancer kept his hood up, his greying hair straggling to shoulder length. With his hunched, unimpressive countenance, he made this scenario considerably less creepy.

The candle flames turned blue then white, and he stepped into the circle.

Immediately, he vanished. I blinked, and white flames sprang up, masking the circle. *Okay…*

“Hope that was meant to happen,” I said.

White light flared around the circle. The necromancer flickered in and out of view, like he was a ghost himself.

“There are spirits stuck in limbo. Two of them.”

Huh? The half-faerie, maybe? I readied my hand on my weapon, not that it’d do any good against a ghost.

The flames within the circle went see-through but still flickered, like a tinted window. And rather than the necromancer, two smaller faces appeared in the circle.

Two. Not faerie. Human. Oddly familiar.

Vance hissed between his teeth. I stole a glance at him and saw his pupils enlarged, and his clenched hands blackened around the edges. Like he was shifting.

Like he knew who the people—children—in the circle were.

And then the familiarity slid into me as surely as the keen edge of a knife.

That was Swanson’s son. And the other must be the necromancers’

missing daughter.

Oh, my god.

“She said they weren’t in this realm,” I croaked. “The Lady of the Tree…

she knew. She never meant they were in Faerie at all.”

No. They hadn’t been kidnapped. They were over the veil—in Death.

I couldn’t do any more than stare in horror. In *Death.*

The necromancer spoke from the circle. “They aren’t dead. Someone has taken them.”

I sucked in a breath. *They can’t be dead.* Taking someone over the veil wasn’t the same as killing them. Not if they were part necromancer and

could take their physical bodies over to the other side in a way no other humans could. But new necromancers usually went through intensive training before they were allowed to cross over. Based on what I’d observed, tearing your physical body loose from the mortal plane was more damaging than crossing into Faerie.

And someone had done it to those kids.

“They wanted children for a reason,” I whispered.

“Only a necromancer could have,” said Vance. “That explains why we couldn’t find them in this realm.” He looked directly at the necromancer’s flickering form. “Find the culprits. They’ll be amongst your own people.”

Yes. They would. But why—and *how?* I’d thought the faeries’ master plan was to open a gateway from their realm into our world. Not *Death.* Faeries couldn’t die.

The Lady of the Tree’s harsh voice echoed in my ears: *My life is limited in this mortal plane.*

The necromancer reappeared, dimly. “The fools. Whoever did this could have permanently upset the balance of the realms. There’s a reason we don’t let just anyone cross over the veil. Especially here.”

“Because magic’s stronger here,” I said slowly. “The veil’s thinner. It opened before…”

In the invasion. The veil opened along with the doorway to Faerie.

Could that be the link? *How?* Faerie was a whole other plane than the afterlife. But opening the door to either realm required a tremendous amount of energy concentrated in one place. I'd never found out how they opened a way through the first time. Nor how I'd got back. Those memories were a blur—even now I wished I remembered.

The afterlife, mortal and faerie realms overlapped. I knew that. Death and Faerie seemed polar opposites. Faeries couldn't die. But they *could* be exiled to a place beyond Faerie, beyond life itself. Beyond Death? Maybe.

Maybe I was on the wrong track. Coming up with wild theories nobody would believe. But… *could* necromancers cross into *that* place, as well as Death? It was the one link I could see, aside from the appearance of the half-faerie ghost.

Angry swearing sounded from the circle. The necromancer reappeared, and his expression showed alarm and anger twisted together before a grey light streamed out from the circle.

Three undead walked out from behind the nearest grave, surrounded by faint blue smoke. Immediately, several necromancers ran, breaking the circle, but more undead appeared, blocking their paths. Like they'd been hiding here the whole time.

Faerie glamour.

I cursed, running at the nearest and swinging my blade at one of them. Its wrists flew wide, severed, but the bastard kept stumbling at me until I severed the top of its skull. Very luckily, what was left of the brain had long gone, but the stench made me gag.

Vance sent pieces of the other two undead flying with a single, deadly swipe of his sword. I'd have called him a show off, but another attacked me. So many necromancers were here, the undead were more than outnumbered. *It's a distraction.* And the necromancers had fallen for the ruse, running around like frightened kittens. Their absolute lack of control surprised me. With their leader struggling within the circle, nobody seemed

to know what to do. Salt flew everywhere, but even that wasn't enough to put down all the undead at once.

I made for the circle. The head necromancer was still somewhere inside—

Vance appeared in front of me, his hands blackened with newly forming scales. He struck an undead so hard he sent it flying halfway across the cemetery, splayed across the top of a grave. His lips twisted in a snarl as he turned to me. His eyes were glazed, like he looked at something far away.

"Real scary," I said, heart thumping. Actually, yeah, he was pretty fucking scary. Black scales continued to spread up his arms, but his hands remained at his sides, his eyes wide and staring.

"Vance?" I asked uncertainly.

I gasped as a grey film covered my vision. Suddenly, the cemetery around me became muted, covered in what looked like a filter. Shapes moved underneath, too pale and indistinct to properly make out. Spirits? Even Vance disappeared, as did the graves. Like I wasn't in this world any longer.

No. Not again.

Like a dam had burst, like the sight of grey flooding the world flipped a switch, the memories came back.

The sky was dark as tar, marked with angry clouds. The roads were equally grey, slapping against my heels as I ran, ran like hell itself pursued me.

Hell caught up at the street's corner, smoke wrapping around my ankles, tripping me. My knees struck concrete and I screamed, fighting against the bonds that held me.

"Don't cry, little girl," whispered a low, melodic voice. "It'll all be over soon."

Then the most beautiful man I'd ever seen stepped out of the shadows and smiled at me.

No. I’m not here. This isn’t happening.

Something hard and sharp dug into my arm. I blinked, and the smoky scene faded out, replaced by graves, and a clawed hand wrapped around my arm.

“Hey—what?” I gawped at Vance. He’d actually drawn blood when he’d grabbed me, but his wide eyes still didn’t seem to see me. His face was pale, his pupils still dilated. “Vance, quit that.” I tugged at his hand, which slowly loosened as he appeared to become aware of his surroundings. Had he seen into the past, too?

“Ivy.” He looked down at his hand, horror flashing across his face. “Shit.

I’m sorry. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Er. *Yes.* But a shout from behind made us both spin around.

The head necromancer stood over two prone bodies in the circle, while other necromancers surrounded them. Hoods fell back, revealing frightened faces. Maybe Vance and I weren’t the only ones the spirit world had tricked.

“Who are they?” Vance’s authoritative voice returned as he strode forward. “The traitors?”

“Cowards,” spat the head necromancer, indicating the two apparently unconscious men at his feet. “They always feared death.”

Necromancers afraid of dying? How the hell did that make sense? Then again, I supposed you didn’t choose whether you were born with the spirit

sight or not. Didn’t mean I felt sorry for them. I was still reeling from what I’d seen.

“Leave them to me,” said Vance.

“They’re my people,” said the necromancer. Smoke swirled around him and for a second, I thought he might actually attack the Mage Lord.

Then he collapsed.

Other necromancers swept forward. “He’s exhausted his powers,”

someone shouted. “Can we have help over here?”

“Not from us,” I muttered. “Vance—”

The Mage Lord shoved two necromancers aside to drag the body of one of the fallen traitors out of the circle. “I’ll deal with these two.”

His overly calm tone made shivers run down my back. No trace remained of the fear in his eyes as he’d relived god-knew-what the veil had shown him.

What had he seen? Something worse than I had? Whatever scared Vance Colton was an adversary I didn’t want to meet.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Vance must have had backup waiting around a corner, because he had only to bark an order into his phone and a black car pulled up. He threw the prisoners bodily into the back and climbed in after them, leaving me to ride shotgun.

Unfortunately, the driver was none other than Ralph, Vance's faerie guard.

He gave me a glare as he started the car. "You're still here?"

I was far from in the mood for arguing. "Yes."

He grunted. "Thought the Mage Lord would have kicked you out by now." He spoke in a low voice. In the mirror, Vance appeared to be watching both prisoners. His eyes were narrowed to slits, and a hint of black remained on his hands.

"It's my case we're solving."

"Thought you were looking for missing kids, not necromancers."

“It’s none of your business, faerie.”

His hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Don’t call me that.”

“It’s true, isn’t it?” My anger began to simmer again. “Your people are trying to do something dangerous. They’re working with necromancers.”

“They aren’t *my* people,” he said. “Besides, that’s total bollocks. All the half-faeries hate the necromancers. They’re the reason nobody can get back to Faerie.”

I stared, my rage fading slightly. “Because the necromancers closed the way back.” Just like they had the veil…

The faerie and mortal worlds overlapped with the veil right here. On the Ley Line.

“Everyone knows that. Which planet have you been on, hedge witch?”

“That’s enough.” Vance’s voice was low, dangerous. “It might have escaped your attention that there are two dangerous criminals here.”

“She accused me of working with the faeries.”

“I’m not interested,” said Vance. “Save your squabbling for later.”

“We’re not children.”

“Then act like it.”

The car pulled up outside a squat red-brick building I recognised as the local jail in mage territory. Ralph continued to mutter to himself, but stopped abruptly as Vance, and the two captives, disappeared.

I blinked. “Why bother using the car if he planned to do that?”

“Maybe he wanted you to come with him,” said Ralph, who didn’t look at all surprised. “Can’t imagine why.”

I undid my seat belt and opened the door. “I’m the one in charge of this case, faerie boy.”

“Stop calling me that!”

His shouts followed me as I marched to the building. The door swung open, but Vance wasn’t in the reception area. He’d presumably told the person at the desk I was coming, because the guy jerked his thumb at a nearby door. Through the glass window, I saw Vance in the act of throwing one of the captives into a cell.

I opened the door and joined him as he threw the second prisoner after the first, closing the cell door on them. The dimly lit corridor cast him into shadow, making him look like a menacing stranger. I shivered, telling myself it was the sudden coldness of the jail.

Vance turned to me. “Do you have anything you want me to ask them?”

“What, apart from how they took those kids into Death?”

“We know how they did it. The children were part necromancer. They had the instinctive ability already.” His eyes shone in the dark, grey as an oncoming raincloud.

“Yeah.” I still couldn’t wrap my head around it. Not least because being this close to the prison cells made the shivers creeping up my spine a hundred times worse. I stepped away, the cold dampness of the corridor wall pressing against my back.

Vance pulled an object out of the air. Not a weapon. It looked like a spell

—black and pointed, like your standard magic wand.

“Wake up,” he commanded, and activated the spell by pointing it directly at the prisoners. The flurry of power made the hairs rise on my arms, and the two men startled awake as suddenly as though he’d tipped a bucket of icy water on their heads.

As for Vance, even with his back turned to me, power radiated off him like lightning on water. The two prisoners cowered away from him. It took every ounce of willpower I possessed to remain steady at his side.

“I am Lord Vance Colton, leader of the mages, and if you don’t give me the truth, I’ll know. Did you take two teenagers with you into Death?”

A pause. The guy’s mouth dropped open, while the second looked like he’d been hit by a hellhound’s fear spell. “Yes.”

“Who gave you the order?”

“A spirit. Fey.”

“Faeries can’t die,” said Vance.

“A half-faerie,” I said.

Vance barely glanced at me, but something in his stance sharpened. He knew… he must know I was holding back information.

“You took orders from a spirit? Ghosts cannot harm anyone. Yourselves, least of all. What did he offer you?”

“Let me guess,” I cut in. “Immortality. That’s what he offered you.

Right?”

This time, Vance did look at me. But he didn’t speak to me. To the prisoners, he said, “Is that true?”

Two nods.

“And on whose orders? A faerie with an ash blade, right? Did you see him?” I couldn’t stop myself this time. Too many people had been hurt already. We needed to know the enemy. Now.

“The Lord of the Grey Vale.”

“A faerie lord,” said Vance. “What is his interest in humans?”

Good question. Most faeries didn’t care, not even if they had half-blood children.

“He doesn’t care for humans,” said the man. “Only—our world. Our energy. What he said made no sense. He appeared over the veil…”

In Death? I stared at him, unable to hide my shock. Faeries—a faerie who could walk into *Death?* I supposed it was an incorporeal world, and faeries weren’t great at obeying the human laws of metaphysics, but…

“Tell me his name,” Vance commanded, apparently disregarding this.

“Velkas. You can’t reach him. He walks wherever he likes. He’s probably here right now. You’ll be next, now you know his name.”

“I see.” Vance made a gesture as if to swat a fly. The two men fell, blood spurting from their arms and chests as though sliced by an invisible sword.

“Holy shit!” I stumbled back. I’ll never get used to the shock when you watch a life taken right in front of you. Especially when you’re standing by the person who pulled the metaphorical trigger. “They might have had more to say.”

“They don’t now.”

Wow. That was cold. I stared at the two men, but Vance made no move to take the bodies from the cell. He tossed the keys to the ground with a disinterested expression.

“So much for an interrogation.” I was curious as hell what he might have witnessed in the cemetery, but I’d be a hypocrite if I didn’t allow him his own secrets. Still, a morbid curiosity persisted. Everyone feared something, but Vance Colton hadn’t batted an eyelid at the creepy factory. Why should a graveyard be any different? What had he seen? Was that why he’d gone into scary-ass mage mode?

“They were no use to us.” He ran a handkerchief down his blade. “You’re shaking.”

“You killed two people in front of me,” I spluttered. “You’re—you’re the leader of the mages. You’re supposed to stand for justice, not senseless slaughter.” I’d expected him to give them a trial at the very least.

“That *was* justice,” he said, his voice chillingly low. “This is a dangerous world we live in.”

“No shit. I’m the one who told *you* that.” I knew I was overreacting. I was a killer. I worked with killers. But I’d never seen a *human* react so casually to taking lives. I’d only seen one person do that. *His* face flashed before my eyes again, fresh from where I’d seen him behind the veil. “I don’t kill people,” I said loudly, willing the vision to go away. “I’ve never killed a human. Or a half-blood faerie, come to that.” Sure, if they deserved it…and yeah, those two guys had.

Didn’t mean the image of chilling calmness on Vance’s face would go away so easily.

“I wouldn’t make restrictions. You never know what you might have to do.” He stepped back. “We’re done here.”

“What did you see?” I couldn’t help it: the words burst out of me. “The veil showed you something—right?”

“Does that mean you’re going to share what *you* saw?”

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Even now, the words wouldn’t come.

“The veil is thinner,” he said, apparently taking my silence as an answer.

“At certain points on the Ley Line, it clearly carries an imprint. The necromancers say places that have seen a lot of death carry the memory with them, usually visible only to those with spirit sight.”

“So… someone’s screwing with the energies of all three realms.”

“Death and Faerie,” said the Mage Lord. “Both are stronger close to the Ley Line.”

Damn. He was smart. He’d already come to the same conclusions as me with none of the knowledge I had. At this rate…

“That may be,” I said, “but neither of *us* can cross over, and the necromancer leader’s out for the count. We’ll have to ask one of the others to do it.”

“Crossing over nearly killed their leader,” he said. “But we know who the enemy is now, and they’re in *this* realm.”

His sharp eyes told me his intentions.

“The faerie… the one the half-blood mentioned,” I said. “You heard what the Lady of the Tree said. He’s promising them their home back. As to how they plan to open the way through… no idea. I thought it was impossible.”

Like faeries walking into Death.

The impossible had become everyday. No denying it. There was no more running. Not for me. I had to face the faeries head-on, no matter what it took. Even if it meant my death. Even if it meant going back.

The thought made violent shivers rack my body. Was I strong enough to survive the faeries a second time? I’d be a fool to assume otherwise. Those kids needed me. And yet…

Velkas. He walks wherever he likes.

“What is it?” said Vance sharply as I backed away, fetching up against the closed door.

“I—I need to check on Isabel. I got a bad feeling.”

Really bad. Paranoia, I hoped, but given the way things were going…

maybe not. She wasn't at home, but in hospital. Which wasn't warded like our house was.

"You're not leaving alone again."

"The faeries showed up at my house twice already. Isabel's in hospital and I __"

Vance's phone rang. He made an impatient noise, and another as I gave him a pleading look. His hand closed on my arm, and we disappeared.

He'd gone before I could turn around. I cursed when I saw he'd left me on my own road. *Should have asked him to take me to the hospital instead.*

But the wards outside our house, normally bright, had gone dull. Blue smoke spun around me, and I pulled out my sword, running through the garden.

"Your friend isn't here," whispered a voice.

A long, spindly faerie uncoiled itself from the overhang above the front door.

"She shouldn't have opted to go to a mortal hospital with us here."

"What the hell did you do to her?"

No. Not her. Please.

"My master needs the skills of a witch to protect himself when we pierce the veil."

No. Shit. Not Isabel.

"So that's your plan," I said, my voice oddly calm. "Open the doors to Faerie and the afterlife at the same time. Didn't millions of humans die twenty years ago when the same happened?"

"That is not my concern."

“I thought not. Did—” I glanced up at the window, but couldn’t see anyone behind the doors.

“Your other friends aren’t here,” he said. “Pity they didn’t show up before you did.”

“You bastard.”

I considered asking what he’d done to Erwin. Hopefully the idiot piskie had hidden itself away. Nobody would die on my account. Especially not Isabel.

The cost of keeping my past quiet wasn’t worth her life.

An icy calm settled over me, and I stabbed the faerie through the neck.

Blood poured out in a fountain, soaking into the doormat. The faerie choked on a laugh, causing more blood to bubble from its ruined throat.

Then it gave one final cough and its head collapsed onto its chest.

I wanted to scream, cry, and slay every faerie in sight—for all the good it’d do. Drawing in a breath, I moved away from the porch. I needed direction.

I needed Vance. I needed to tell him the truth. But once the truth came out, there was no going back.

With shaking hands, I dialled Vance’s number. “Vance—”

“They’re targeting my family.”

I gripped the phone hard. “What?”

“They took my cousin.”

“Shit. They took her, too. Isabel. They—they’re using her in their spell.”

And we had no plan. Nothing. Apart from our own strengths. Us against Faerie.

I took a deep breath. “You’re going to have to trust me, but I think I can get us over the boundary to Faerie. I’m just not so sure I can get us back.”

A long pause. Then: “I’m coming.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Vance appeared at my side in a dramatic swirl of magic I'd have made fun of if not for the look on his face. The storm kicked up by his arrival lifted the hair from my head and tugged at my clothes. His eyes were narrowed, his ordinarily combed hair dishevelled, his mouth an angry line. He didn't even react to the dead faerie on the porch.

"He said they needed her to protect them when they open the veil." My voice came out calm, numbed by the iciness in my veins, but it wouldn't last. Either I'd break, or I'd kill whoever stood in my way. I couldn't afford not to bet on the latter.

Vance looked as though he wanted to stab the already-dead faerie, but he didn't move.

"They'll do it where the invasion started," I said. "They'll open the veil.

Do you know where it is?"

A nod. He turned to me again, another sharp blade of magic cutting the air. What happened when he lost control? Did he unleash a wild tornado and tear up everything in sight?

“You might want to tone that down.” I regretted speaking when his eyes, stormy grey, looked into mine.

“You promised me the truth.”

I raised my palms. “I’ll hide nothing from you, but to be honest, you’re freaking me out. If you promise you won’t kill me for this, I’ll tell you.”

Or arrest me. We were past that now. I’d mow even the Mage Lord down if it brought me closer to Isabel.

Vance stepped towards me. His cloak swirled around his ankles, but the breeze died down. I hadn’t even realised I was shivering so hard. I forced my hands to stay at my sides so he wouldn’t see me shaking. He had my life in his hands now.

“You were there during the invasion,” he said. “According to records, you’d have been six years old when that happened. That’s the only recorded time faeries have broken into our realm.”

I nodded. Facts, I could deal with. “Yeah. It’s complicated, that’s for damn sure, but I think some faeries must be exceptions to the rules. That faerie with the ash blade… I don’t know how he got here. It’s the truth. But I *have* been through the veil before. To Faerie.”

My heart settled in my throat like a solid weight.

“Show me.”

I shook my head. “It’s not that simple. I’ll tell you this: there’s a part of Faerie that’s cut off from everywhere else. It’s where they send exiles, and the doors to that realm opened during the invasion when Summer and Winter came here. That’s where the faerie with the ash blade—this Velkas

—he came from there. Somehow, he can come through, but I'm guessing the power's not open to everyone. Except he wants to open a permanent way through again."

"You said you know how to get there."

"I might." This was a long shot, but the spiral of memories triggered by what the veil showed me made me surer than ever. "They must need Death to do it. To open a way through. I guess because the realms all overlap at the Ley Line. I can't say how exactly. I didn't see how it happened before."

I'd seen how Avakis had taken me. The memory played out behind my eyes, and cold sweat gathered on my back. I wasn't strong enough to face him again.

He's dead. He's dead.

I stumbled forward, and Vance came to meet me. "You lied," he said.

"You don't have faerie blood at all. Where did you get your magic?"

My voice cracked. "I stole it. I stole it from the Sidhe Lord Avakis, after I cut his throat and escaped his prison."

For a long, long few seconds, I thought the blade would appear and finish me off. He watched me, not speaking. His eyes were like dark pits.

Then he lowered his hands, and the tension crept away from me like he'd removed a sword from pointing at my neck.

"You aren't going to ask for my story?"

"No."

I blinked. "Is that it?"

I'd expected an interrogation at the very least. Unless he wanted to save it until after this was over.

“You’ve told me what I needed to know.”

I’d worry what that meant later. I’d left out the key part… my magic was the crux. They needed it to open the way into Faerie. By going to them, I’d be giving them exactly what they wanted.

“Except…” He studied me. “You’re human. Why would they target you in the first place?”

“I don’t know.”

I told the truth. Faeries didn’t need a reason to screw with humans. Avakis had been drunk on power during the invasion. He’d taken dozens of us.

Everyone assumed us amongst the dead. Nobody could confirm otherwise.

“Why *your* family?” I asked. “You said your parents were dead.”

“They are. My father’s brother survived. His daughter’s part shifter. They took her.” A faint current went through the air, simmering with anger.

“And you didn’t guess she’d be a target?”

“That side of the family never got along with my parents. I thought…”

She wouldn’t be targeted. Why? Because she was a mage. Because she lived in a fancy house surrounded by protection and servants?

I didn’t say any of this aloud. His dangerous expression alone told me he cared about his cousin, and if the faeries took her…

Goddammit, we needed to stop them.

“I’m taking a wild guess the faerie came into this realm through the veil, somehow,” I said. “I think the hellhounds came through that way, too.

But… he’s immortal. If we do the same, we might die.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

My breath stopped. I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out.

“If you’re wrong,” he said, moving closer, “there’s more than our lives on the line.”

“I know,” I whispered. “God, I know. You aren’t going to arrest me or—”

He gave me a grim smile, shaking his head. “No. I’m not. I’ll have to order every mage to meet near the place where the invasion started. I might be sending them to their deaths.”

I swallowed. “I know. Believe me. But it’s true—that has to be the place.

And Isabel… she’s barely recovering from being poisoned. She can’t fight.

I’ll have to get her out of there first.”

“I know.” He looked down at his phone, which had appeared in his hand without my noticing. “One team’s already on the way.”

“Guess we have our own transport.” My heart skittered as his hand brushed my arm, the skin stinging a little. He frowned at the scratch marks

—where he’d grabbed me with his clawed hand, and torn through the sleeve. For a moment, we looked at one another. He didn’t need to say it aloud—the apology was written on his face. “Vance. What happened back there?”

He shook his head. “If I shift again, stay away from me. Please.”

I blinked. “Can’t—can’t you control it?” Shifter powers were volatile, I knew, but he seemed to have a handle on them pretty well. The way he controlled the shifting scales on his hand was far from the uncontrolled outbursts that frequently occurred over in shifter territory. I’d never really thought about the level of self-control it must take to do that.

“I can,” he said. “But only if I’m aware of my own actions. The magic of the veil—it blinded me. And I can’t guarantee it won’t happen again.”

Wow. The Mage Lord actually admitted he couldn't do something. This must be a first. His sincerity warmed the icy sensation inside me a little. His hand moved up my arm, brushed against my neck.

I shivered. "You're quarter-blooded. You can't shift all the way, can you?

What's your form look like?"

"Quarter-blooded shifters usually don't have the ability to shift," he said.

"What you saw is the furthest I've ever gone. I don't have a full shifter form."

"It'd be something scaly and horrible, right?" My filter had gone walkabout again. He stood close, and smelled so good, even with the dangerous aura still hovering around him. The hint of a storm, ready to sweep me away in its embrace. That's what he smelled like, too—the air before a thunderstorm. An electrical charge. A warning. A promise.

"I don't want to harm you." His voice moved in tandem with his fingertips, sending a shiver through me that was as far from cold as possible.

"I can handle myself, in case you hadn't noticed," I breathed. Somehow he'd moved so his face was above mine, near enough the faint stubble on his chin brushed against my cheek. Enough that his scent overwhelmed my senses. The spark in his eyes ignited.

Then he closed the distance between us, his mouth coming down on mine, and his tongue swept into my mouth in a single possessive motion. All other thoughts left my mind—all thought of the battle ahead, the danger, even the faeries. Even the fact that he could have killed me a minute ago. My heart quickened, my pulse fluttering in my wrists as they twined around the back of his head. His hair was soft as his hands were rough with the hint of the scales he'd worn not long ago.

He stepped away, his forehead resting against mine. "No turning back now," he murmured.

No kidding, I thought, lightheadedness passing over me. I sucked in a breath, inhaling his scent. His grip on my arms tightened.

A gust of wind swept us up, knocking me back to my senses, and a second later, we reappeared in a field I didn't recognise—at least, not at first. Vance released me and I took a couple of steps, looking around. The grass was mostly burned away, the blackened remains of tree trunks surrounding us. It was only when my eyes found the road running parallel, visible now there were no trees in the way, that the familiarity slammed into me.

I knew this place.

I'd lived here.

CHAPTER TWENTY

This park had once been within walking distance of my own house. The house itself, I knew, now lay in blackened ruins along with the entire neighbourhood. The newly re-grown trees masked the ruins, but I remembered everything.

I remembered running down the road to the park, away from the screaming. I remembered a tempest sweeping up the world. Icy blasts interspersed with explosions that rocked the ground underneath my feet.

Strange, horrible creatures materialised in the streets. I pressed my hands to my eyes, trying to stem the flow of images. What with the horrors that had happened after leaving, I'd blocked out the memories of the day the faeries came.

The roads had buckled as giants pulled themselves out of the earth. Fire-throwing imps ran down the streets, hurling balls of flame at houses.

Crawling, spindly faeries smashed windows, long fingers gouging at eyes and tearing at throats. Kelpies crawled from lakes and ponds and trampled

people beneath hooves like iron.

Nobody could have been prepared. They'd flooded the streets in a devastating wave, chasing everyone away. My parents were out at work. I'd been at school when they came, and fled to the doors when the emergency

alarms went off. The road outside had been torn to pieces, and the sight of a giant rampaging into nearby houses had flipped on the survival instinct buried deep inside me.

I ran, so fast my feet might have grown wings. I had no memory of running to the park, but I must have ended up there, because that's where I'd collapsed, breathless, desperate tears flowing down my face.

And then… *he'd* appeared. A knight in shining armour. A hand in the dark, reaching to save me.

"Ivy." Vance didn't look too happy, either. His mouth pulled into a thin line, his eyes cold and sharp. Had he seen the invasion, too? He'd lost most of his family in it. I took a steadying breath. *I'm not alone. I'm not that girl anymore.*

Then my eyes fell on the field. A glowing point marked the grass, like a post on a sports field, illuminated. Several other glowing lights shone at intervals.

Shit. This was a giant summoning circle.

And someone lay in the centre. A woman, unconscious, too far away to make out her features. But I knew her.

"Isabel!"

Goddammit. To get to her, I'd need to walk into the circle itself. Exactly where they wanted me to. If this circle was meant to open a way to Faerie, and they needed my magic . I couldn't risk it.

I turned to Vance. "Can you displace her?"

He hesitated. “There’s a lot of energy stirring up around here. If I use magic, I might trigger whatever this circle’s intended to do.”

Crap. He had a point. What if the trap was meant for both of us? It was the sort of underhanded shit I’d expect from the faeries.

“Give me a minute,” he said, stepping forward. “I’m going to try to break it.”

I opened my mouth to warn him off, and hands closed around my throat.

I shoved my elbows back, hitting something solid. Human or not, it didn’t matter. My sword swung around and would have decapitated the guy behind me, had he not turned into smoke.

What the hell?

The faerie smiled faintly. His ears were pointed, his hair black and glossy, though transparent. Not a pure faerie. Another half-blooded ghost.

Vance swore beside me as another spirit appeared. His sword flashed out, but the half-faerie’s body turned transparent.

A hand grabbed at my arm—a solid one. I stabbed the half-faerie with Irene, only for its body to turn transparent again.

Oh, shit.

“The walls are breaking down,” I said, circling the half-faerie. I’d have to wait for it to become solid again before I could strike it. “Must be. They’re ghosts, but they can take on solid form…”

Still, they couldn’t use magic. Sure, nothing could actually harm a spirit—

that I knew of—but they sure as hell could harm *us,* if they turned solid. I slashed with my blade and met only air. Magic swirled around me in a blue cloud. Looked like spirit faeries could trigger my magic even when they couldn’t use it themselves.

Vance wore a murderous expression, his hands faintly darkening where I assumed his shifter blood reacted to his rage. He couldn't land a hit on a creature without a solid body, no matter how he tried. He struck out with attacks that would have torn apart a solid opponent. Then he lowered the blade.

The air pulsed around him and the spirits reeled back, caught in a blast of wind. The hairs lifted from my head even as the wind sent the spirits the other way, driving them further back until they'd melted into grey smoke.

"Displaced the air," he said. "Thought it was worth a try."

"Good job." I twisted to make sure nothing else was behind us, and the ground tilted under my feet.

"What—?"

"I'm trying to move the earth," said Vance, moving to stand at my side.

Oh. Clever idea. If he collapsed the ground underneath the glowing lights on the circle, it'd break the spell and I'd be able to get to Isabel.

Though cracks appeared in the once-green field, the circle remained intact. "Defensive spell?"

"Must be protected," he said. "Damn."

"Where are the necromancers when you need them?"

The spirit chose that moment to punch me in the face.

I reeled back, thrown off by how much getting hit by a dead person hurt.

Vance snarled and stabbed at the half-faerie, but as the enemy had turned transparent again, it had no effect.

Another transparent figure lunged at me. I swiped and stabbed, my sword useless against the dead.

“Back to hiding again?” I taunted it. “Too much of a coward to face me like a man?”

The spirit’s teeth pulled back in a snarl. “You’re her, aren’t you? The girl who crawled out of Faerie alive.”

A trickle of fear ran down my spine. “How do you know who I am?”

“Everyone does.” The spirit grinned. “Now Velkas is after you. You were a fool to come here. Even Velkas didn’t expect you to run so easily into his trap.”

The circle. “I had no idea I was so important,” I said, trying to ignore my pounding heart. “Pissed off I killed Avakis? He deserved what he got.”

“I agree.”

Huh? “You think it was a good thing I killed him?”

“Avakis took power that wasn’t his. In killing him, you did us all a favour.”

“Good for you.” I jabbed at him. “Any reason you’re trying to kill me?”

I thought you needed me. I didn’t voice the words aloud, but he caught the implied meaning.

“We’re having fun with your mage friend before Velkas makes his move.”

“So you’re just lackeys,” I said. “Figures. How does it feel, not being able to use magic? I was told you’re nothing without it.” I grinned, feeling my own magic come to life around me in tendrils of swirling blue.

A furious expression crossed his face.

“Nothing,” I goaded him. “You’re less than the lowest mortal, faerie scum.” Blue light flowed down my arms, and my smile widened.

The faerie lunged for my throat, hands turning solid, and I caught one and twisted. The half-faerie screamed in pain, the rest of his body solidifying,

and I took the opportunity to stab him through the neck. I looked up from the gushing blood to see Vance kick away the body of his own opponent.

“Nicely done.” He scanned me as though checking for injuries. “So you have a reputation.”

“Ugh. I’ll worry about that later.”

“Ivy.” Isabel’s faint voice made my head snap up.

“Shit. Don’t move,” I told her. “I’ll get you out.” Magic swirled around me, halting my steps.

A quiet laugh sounded. “Did you think you could fight us using magic that doesn’t belong to you?”

A blast of icy air slammed into me, sending me back several steps. Only years of training kept me on my feet.

“We’re close to life again, Ivy. So close…”

Close to life. They’d hit me with Winter magic.

“Vance, they have their elemental magic back!” I warned. Just what we needed—faerie ghosts with all the magic and none of the weaknesses.

Twin ice crystals sprang up at my feet, damn near skewering me. I leaped out of range, blade flashing as they grew into stalagmite-like formations.

Bits of ice flew everywhere, but the spirit had vanished again.

A flurry of ice shot at my face—not snow, but pure ice, formed into a thousand daggers.

I didn’t have time to do more than raise my arm before every single one shattered at once.

Vance stalked forwards, for all the world like a predator despite our obvious disadvantage. More ice daggers materialised, and my magic arrived in full

force. I moved with a speed I'd have never normally been capable of, dodging the icy wave and leaping at the spirit. It vanished again, and the ground turned to rock-hard ice. I clenched my teeth together as I fell onto my knees. Blood stained the ice when I stood up. My hands numbed even through the magic. The air turned so cold, breathing hurt. These spirits were drawing on the power of Winter itself. *Impossible.*

All the realms overlapped here. Magic was stronger than ever.

Shivering, I reached into my pocket for an explosive spell, wishing I'd brought a flamethrower one instead. The only counter to Winter magic was

—

A blast of heat shot over my head, igniting the dead husk of an old tree.

Vines exploded into life, tendrils creeping over the ground, while the sound of a thousand birds singing crashed into my ears.

"Make your fucking minds up!" I yelled at the spirits. Surely somebody in Summer or Winter must have noticed their magic being stolen. But if I knew anything, it was that you could never rely on a faerie.

An icy hand grabbed at my arm. I whirled and snatched it, but the hand went transparent. So did the creature it belonged to—a tall long-fingered half-faerie with a wicked grin.

"I remember you," crooned the faerie. "The little girl with the big mouth.

Do you remember me?"

I remembered. He'd been one of Avakis's guards, who'd taken a particular delight in tormenting me. My teeth clenched together, every part of me concentrating on the here and now. The spirits had no power over me.

Words meant nothing. I had magic. Faerie magic.

I bared my teeth and let every ounce of anger in my body flow to the magic in my hand. Blue energy surged, and this time, the spirit actually fell back.

But a thousand more had appeared, silent as—well, ghosts. They formed a barrier between me and the circle, and Vance, who fought a dozen of them at once.

The brief flash of heat faded as icy energy rose in the air in a blizzard that numbed my hands instantly. A shard of ice crashed over my head and I dropped to my front, rolling over to strike another one aside with my sword.

Even with my magically enhanced instincts, there were a thousand of them and only one of me.

Ice formed cuffs around my hands, around my ankles, and when I tried to get up, I couldn't.

No. Please, no.

I fought against the bonds with everything I had, pushed myself to my knees, but all sensation disappeared from my legs and feet, and my hand slipped on the sword's hilt.

Not ten metres away, Vance disappeared behind a wall of snow. His blade continued to strike out, but slower than usual.

I won't die here.

I screamed, and energy flooded me, launching me to my feet. I swung my sword and a jolting motion told me I'd hit something solid. The air thrummed with power, but it didn't come from Vance.

It came from me.

The level of energy rose, and with it, so did *my* power. Around me, faerie ghosts became solid as the power level heightened. I could feel it, humming in my own skin, like a second heartbeat.

My next strike knocked three of them back.

They're solid. You can hit them now.

My sword flashed out, and the movement relieved the numb sensation in my fingers. My legs remained locked in place. I focused on every ounce of faerie magic I possessed. *I can do this. I can fight them.*

Sure, there were a thousand enemies, even if I could actually hit them now. But I'd never been one to let odds deter me.

Fire burst into life without warning, sending a dozen faerie ghosts reeling back.

"Need a hand?" asked Drake, walking out of the fire with his cloak swirling around him.

Finally. The other mages were here.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Drake threw another handful of fire, dispersing the ice crystals lingering in the air and sending half-faeries scattering.

“You picked a fight with the wrong mage,” he said to the nearest, who trembled and ran, immediately caught up in the crush. You could fit a thousand spirits into a tight place, no problem. However, with solid bodies, the effect was like a dance floor turning into a mosh pit. The half-faeries rammed into one another in an effort to reach me, and every attack aimed at me ended up hitting one of their companions. Flashes of red and blue lit up the air as Summer clashed with Winter. The confused jumble of noise set my senses blaring.

An explosion of fiery light told me where Drake was. I cut three half-faeries down, trying to see Vance, but found myself hemmed in as a thousand uncoordinated bodies fell over one another. They only half seemed to be there, and occasionally my hand would pass right through one of them. If not for the faerie magic still humming around me, I’d have been knocked down. As it was, it took everything I had to push my way through to a spot

where several half-faeries disappeared into nothingness, like someone had swept them out of sight. Only one person could do that.

“Vance?”

He kicked a half-faerie aside, his blade gleaming silver. These half-faerie shadows didn’t bleed when cut.

“Where the hell are the necromancers?” he asked someone over my shoulder. A blast of fire behind me set the half-faeries scrambling away, and Drake strode over to us, fire streaming from his hands. As Vance sent two more half-faeries flying with a wave of his hand, heads severed, Drake used his hands to direct the fire. Flames separated into two paths, forming a protective barrier around us.

“Isabel’s still in the circle.” I couldn’t see her over the crush of bodies outside.

“They’re not in the circle,” said Vance. “They can’t get inside, I don’t think. It’d mess with the energy.”

“The circle keeps even the dead out,” said Drake. “I’ve never seen one that strong. They must have taken the information right from the necromancers themselves and used those apprentice children to activate it.”

Vance swore. “Only the necromancers can bind those spirits.”

“And your magic? Doesn’t it work?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Temporarily. They’re spirits. They can’t breathe or bleed, and even being displaced isn’t permanent. They’re effectively undead, but not tethered to this realm.”

“Just what we need,” I muttered. “Those kids—I couldn’t see them in the circle.” Which meant they must still be over the veil, where none but a necromancer could reach them.

Shouts rang out beyond the flames. Drake hovered by the edge, throwing fireballs at any half-faeries who came near. “Bloody creatures. Half our

mages are out there. I warned them not to get too close."

The fire flickered, dimming slightly, and a chill went up my arms.

"Er—Drake, can faerie magic counteract mage magic?" I asked.

"I don't know." He and Vance exchanged glances. "There's a shit-ton of energy stirred up around here that shouldn't be. We can't get near the circle."

"That's necromantic magic, not faerie," said Vance.

And they have Isabel. Goddammit, I couldn't leave her there, even if it was provisionally safer inside than outside the circle with a thousand half-faerie ghosts rampaging around.

Blue smoke swirled around my ankles, then turned into snow. The blizzard swept us up, dousing the flames. Drake shouted out, but the driving snow blocked my view.

Even my enhanced speed didn't help me avoid it—hell, if anything, it made the tiny blades of ice hit harder. I bit down on a cry of pain, gathering my own magic, but I'd never faced Winter faeries like this before.

Insubstantial figures flickered in and out of the misty swirl as shards of ice struck my exposed skin. I swore, certain my arms were bleeding by this time, and equally sure the half-faeries were somehow combining their magic. I couldn't even see Vance or Drake, but the occasional burst of fire told me they were still fighting.

The ground buckled and I fell forward, fetching up against the ground. I looked up, ready to rejoin the fight, but the spirits were—gone. A clear path in front of me led to the summoning circle, and no half-faeries barred the way.

What…?

They'd disappeared. Every single one of them, as though the blizzard they'd conjured had swept them away. Chilled air on my back made me

spin around.

Drake stood alone, a circle of fire surrounding him. Other mages were scattered throughout the field, and I glimpsed expressions of bewilderment that their enemies had vanished—before another chilled blast of air from my right drew my attention to the only spot on the field still masked in swirling snowflakes.

Vance.

He'd disappeared beneath the blizzard—or what was left of it. Drake took a tentative step his way and I walked forward, too, but the chill blasted against my hands, pushing me back.

"Don't get too close!" Drake shouted. "He's taken all the power into himself, the fool. He has to displace it otherwise it'll burn him up."

"Or freeze him out." I stared. Damn. "How can he do that?" There were a thousand faeries. Even if not all of them could use magic, for one person to contain *that* much power…

A grey film filtered across my vision, and a faint sound of music playing reached my ears. I stilled, looking around for the source, but it played too quietly to tell. Like a piano.

Shivers ran through me, though the blizzard remained enclosed around Vance. The circle lay undisturbed. A few mages walked nearby like they were trying to figure out how to break it.

The tune ran like cold fingers on the back of my neck. A whimper rose in my throat, though not a sound escaped.

"Remember, Ivy?" whispered the voice.

Did I ever. That fucking piano music. I pressed my hands to my ears, glancing at the others. Thick smoke rose between us, dense and grey.

And inside were a thousand faces, baring impossibly white teeth at me.

Spirits. Half-faeries.

“You’re dead,” I told them, removing my hands from my ears.

Small figures appeared between them—frightened faces, wide eyes.

Humans. None older than fifteen.

No. God, no.

I knew them all. Every one.

“I tried to save you.” My voice cracked. “I tried.”

The other prisoners. They’d fled at the same time as I had, freed at the moment I’d killed Avakis. But the spell of the faeries went too deep. I was the only one who’d made it out of the forest, back to the mortal world.

They’d died. Faerie had taken them.

These were the faces that had haunted my dreams for months after I’d come home. I’d saved myself, but hadn’t been able to save anyone else.

Did they linger on, in the between world?

Or was this a faerie trick?

I closed my eyes. “I’m sorry I left you behind,” I said, “but I can’t help what I did in the past. I have a job to do.”

“If you use Avakis’s magic to open the veil, we’ll be free again,”

whispered a voice. “You’ll be free of the guilt, forever.

I struggled not to open my eyes, but it was like fighting against the wind.

My eyes flew open to see smoke surrounding me, punctuated by faces. The faces of the dead. Decomposing before my eyes, crawling with maggots.

“This is a trick,” I said, loudly.

Whether it was or not, I couldn’t give in. There were two, maybe three, living children trapped behind the veil. They could still be saved. I wouldn’t abandon them.

I closed my eyes and walked into the fog. My cheeks were wet from tears I hadn’t felt fall. The grief was still there. I’d had to lock it away or I’d never move on from what happened.

I bumped into someone solid. Tall. Familiar.

“Vance?”

He turned to face me, wearing the same blanked-out expression he had the last time he’d been in the fog.

“Sarah,” he said, looking right through me, pale as a ghost himself.

Crap. He saw someone dead, too.

“Sarah, what are you doing here? Get back in the house. It’s not safe."

“I’m Ivy,” I said. “We need to go.” I tugged on his arm, but it was like trying to shift a metal post. He was too strong, and even now, his skin burned cold against me. The blizzard. He’d taken in all its power. “Vance, you stopped the magic of a thousand faeries. You can snap out of this.”

He continued to look right past me in a way that was frankly creepy. His hands were icy cold. I looked down to see black scales covering his fingertips.

Oh, shit. He’d told me to back off if he shifted, but he was the only solid thing in this forest of smoke. I shoved him in the side, bruising my elbow.

“Vance, snap the hell out of it! For god’s sake, you’re the freaking Mage Lord.”

No response. The faeries had him, and I never figured out how to get around their mind tricks. If I hadn't experienced them before, I'd have fallen, too.

I slapped him across the face with a deafening crack that sent him stumbling back a few steps. My hand stung, but his gaze dropped to the floor, and the blankness in his eyes shifted aside.

"Ivy?" Vance shook his head, wearing a dazed expression. "What…?"

"Faerie tricks," I said. "They can make you see things. Whatever you saw, it wasn't real."

Anger flashed in his eyes. "Blasted creatures. Did you hit me?"

"Didn't know what else to do." I looked into the fog. "I can't see the others."

"I'll find them."

"Who's Sarah?"

There was a pause. "My sister. She was supposed to hide the night of the invasion, but she ran outside when the faeries stormed the wall down."

Oh. "Sorry."

He moved, the sword appearing in his hands, but the fog didn't shift when he swept the blade down in a motion that would have easily cut an opponent in two.

"Whatever spell this is, I can't break it." He watched me, his eyes the same colour as the fog. "Can you?"

What? "No."

"You've never tried to use your magic to break a faerie's spell?"

“I use it defensively.” When it cooperated. What with the glimpse down memory lane, the temporary effects of the magic had faded and I was back to normal, human speed.

“We work on defensive magic first when training new mages, but I find the offensive mode of a mage’s ability is effectively a reflection of the defensive spell. Perhaps it’s the same for you.”

Huh? This didn’t seem the time for a magic lesson. “Maybe, but this magic—it’s not mine. I stole it. I can use it to defend myself, but it seems to need that trigger for me to use it at all.”

“I’ve seen you use magic when angry,” he said. “Would you say it needs an emotional trigger?”

“Maybe. But we have bigger problems.”

“We do,” he said. “But I just took on the power of a thousand Winter faeries, magnified by Death, and the magic looked and felt very similar to yours.”

Huh? “Winter? My magic isn’t—I guess Avakis was originally a Winter lord. Faeries lose the essence of their magic when they’re exiled, though.

Then they fight over the scraps. I don’t know how Avakis rose to power, but I’d guess it involved stealing magic from others.”

The sound of a car’s engine cut through the silence, as did a stream of piercing light. The fog parted, and Vance spun around.

Several necromancers walked towards us, towards the circle. *Finally.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“About bloody time,” I said.

Two robed figures marched across the grass—or what was left of it. They made right for the summoning circle, as if none of us were there.

“Hey!” I ran after them. Isabel was still trapped in there. If she got hurt by accident… “Hold on. Nothing can touch that circle.”

“It’s only a summoning circle,” said one of them.

“Only?” How clueless could you get? “There’s a thousand half-faerie spirits watching you. That place is supposed to be a gateway back to their own world.”

“What?” Both of them stared at me.

I didn’t have time for dealing with sceptical necromancers. “Trust me when I say there’s worse than undead behind there.”

“She’s right,” said Vance, from behind me. “Don’t open the circle unless you’re certain you can deal with what’s hiding there. You need to take it down without using too much power. The energy levels are unstable.”

“How dare you tell us how to do our jobs,” one necromancer said. “We were told to abandon our *own* territory when the undead are rising on our

doorstep, because apparently helping your incompetent colleagues is more important.”

“It might have escaped your attention,” said Vance, in his most dangerous voice, “that this is the crux of the energy disturbance. The faeries are planning to rip open a doorway through the veil. I’m assuming they learned how to do it by questioning *your* traitor colleagues.”

“How *dare* you—”

A half-faerie appeared before him and thrust its hand through the necromancer’s chest.

I stared for a moment, then the air lit up as a thousand spirits reappeared.

Blue light flared along the circle’s edge, and a blast of icy air sent me staggering back. I gasped as the coldness intensified like a thousand needles stabbing at every inch of exposed skin.

“The gate is breaking,” yelled the necromancer.

A spirit flew at him, passing through his body, and the necromancer went still.

Then a high pitched laugh issued from his throat. He spun to face me, an inhuman smirk twisting his lips, and sent a blast of cold, blue light from his fingertips. I ducked on pure instinct. *Was that faerie magic? Is the spirit possessing him?*

I blocked the magic with my own, my mind reeling. Ghost faeries possessing human bodies. What the hell next?

I used my own magic to deflect another attack, but the spirit used the necromancer's body to lunge at me with inhuman speed. I blocked his strike only because I used faerie magic enhanced speed myself, but *this* faerie clearly hadn't forgotten how to use a physical body. A punch to my jaw set my head ringing, and I stumbled.

Vance stepped in. Rather than using his sword, he struck out with a hand now covered in shiny black scales. The necromancer flew back several feet, pitching against the circle's edge.

Vance met my gaze, and I damn near forgot we were in the middle of a fight. His eyes had narrowed to dark slits, which combined with the claws and scales, gave him a positively demonic appearance.

"Vance?" I asked uncertainly.

Fear squeezed my chest. Oddly, at that moment I remembered Vance had said he'd become head of the mages by killing the last one. Was he losing control again?

Vance roared, hands now entirely taken over by long black claws, and hit out as the second necromancer attacked.

Yes. He's losing it. Get away.

I drew my sword, certain the necromancers themselves were dead, and only the spirits' presence kept them moving. I couldn't afford to hesitate.

My sword swung, blood spurted, and the necromancer crumpled like a puppet with its strings cut.

I stared transfixed for a moment. I hadn't expected my first human kill to be like—that.

Vance roared again. His claws reached out and knocked down the second necromancer, who didn't get up this time. Another spirit flew past, shrieking and yowling. The breeze lifted the hair from my head, but I hardly noticed the cold this time. The way Vance looked around with predatory

eyes made me feel more like I stood on the same side as an unpredictable monster than an ally.

“Vance.” I waved a hand in front of his face. He didn’t react. I considered slapping him again, but his furious shifted form might take my head off with those claws.

Drake shouted, and the summoning circle’s lights ignited again. Turning my back on Vance, I searched for Isabel, hoping she was safe. The circle remained shrouded in grey smoke. Damn. I stepped towards the circle, to be pushed back by an invisible barrier. Spirits—too many to count—thickened the air. If it was this bad here, a total shitstorm must be erupting on necromancer territory. No wonder they’d sent their worst members.

It was up to us to stop it.

Snarling sounded within the circle. Hellhounds. Isabel lay defenceless, and I had no way to cross over.

Except one.

I pulled one of the explosive spells from my pocket and aimed carefully at the point where two parts of the summoning circle converged in a beam of light. Then I ran like hell.

The explosion tore up the grass, sending fragments of earth surging into the air. I yelled at Vance to run, too, but I couldn’t hear my own voice over the racket. A second explosion triggered another, then another, and the lights were obscured in dust and earth and smoke. A familiar smell caught in my nostrils. Decay. Death.

Faerie.

A snarling noise. I froze, muscles locking in place. *Hellhounds.*

The smoke cleared as faerie magic swirled around me, blue light illuminating the darkness. The lights of the summoning circle were gone, snuffed out. I’d blasted a hole into the field and knocked out two lights.

Behind the wreck, Isabel lay, surrounded by hellhounds.

No. It's too late.

This time, no circle blocked my way, because the earth had been torn up. I leaped over the gap, feet skidding in the mud. Isabel stirred, and relief seeped through me—she was alive.

"Hey!" I yelled at the hellhounds, brandishing my sword.

I ran, using the faerie magic to propel myself forward. I flew a good ten feet, slicing a hellhound's throat in the same motion. I'd have been proud of the achievement if I hadn't unintentionally launched myself right into the path of a second beast. Ducking a giant paw, I brought my sword in a slashing motion across its nose. Then caught it in the mouth. My blade sank through the roof into the monster's brain, and it collapsed.

Three more leaped in, but a handful of fire flew past and knocked one of them into the other. I glimpsed Drake running towards what was left of the circle before a third tried to bite my wrist. I dodged and stabbed it in the neck.

Drake hurled a globe of fire so intense, I had to jump aside, but it sent the hellhounds scattering. I crouched beside Isabel, confident Drake could take care of the rest for now.

"Ivy," she groaned. "I'm okay. I—"

"Don't speak," I said, slipping my arm around her head. "I'll get you out of here."

"It's too late." She swallowed. "The spirits are gone. They went back. I heard them… they opened a way." Her hand pointed, wavering.

Dread punched a hole in my chest. I looked up.

Across the path, where the back of the circle had been, a haze of grey smoke obscured whatever had been there before. The lights marking the circle had gone out. Instead…

A chill blast of wind struck, like I'd summoned it into being myself. Faces began to appear in the smoke, but indistinct, and fading by the second.

"What… what happened?"

"They set up a trap." Isabel attempted to push herself up onto one elbow.

"Mad guy said he only wanted to lure everyone here—that he already had everything he needed."

"Who. A faerie?"

"I think he was." She rubbed her eyes. "I was kind of out of it. But he mentioned your name."

"I thought he needed my magic."

No. Any magic would have done. What with the spiritual energy going haywire enough to solidify a thousand spirits, of course there'd been enough energy to open the veil.

The smoke. It's through the smoke.

The tall, beautiful man had appeared right—right there. I relaxed my grip on Isabel, letting her balance on my knees, as my arms went weak. So did my legs. I wanted to curl into a ball and scream.

Instead, I remained kneeling, and watched, and remembered.

"Come with me. I'll take you home."

When he'd spoken, every instinct, every single story about not following strangers had fled from my mind. People were dying all around me. There was nowhere left to run. This stranger had given me an ultimatum.

I'd taken it. I'd followed him into the smoke.

"Isabel," I whispered, closing my eyes. "Are you okay to stay here?"

She groaned a little. “Yeah. Give me a minute. The healing spell did work, it’s just slow as shit thanks to those bastard creatures.”

I opened my eyes. “Drake over there—he can be trusted. Get to him. I have to go and find those missing kids. They’re behind that smoke.”

In Faerie. Part of me wanted to tell her this was a last goodbye, but if I did, I’d never leave.

I stood. Magic wrapped around me in tendrils, perhaps meant to be reassuring. I didn’t know. I didn’t understand my own magic, but right now, that and my weapons were the only thing standing between me and a faerie invasion.

The iron. You have iron.

I gripped Irene and stepped forward. Then again. One footstep followed the next, the dead grass disappearing, the smoke growing closer. At the same time, the blue smoke around my own body thickened.

Blue light spilled down my wrists to my hands, turning to smoky tendrils that fanned out from my hands. My own magic spilled through the haze, lighting the dark, until an opening became visible. A grey-tinted path into the dark.

I knew what waited on the other side was bad news.

And I knew the children were over there, too.

The gate had opened. They hadn’t needed my magic to do it, after all.

I chanced one brief look over my shoulder, but couldn’t bring myself to meet Vance’s eyes. I had to do this alone. I wasn’t strong enough to stop and say goodbye.

I won’t die. I’ll come back.

A tearing sensation tugged at my heart, until the sound of faint screaming chilled my blood. Children screaming.

For them.

Quiet voices, crying out for help.

I walked, then ran, for the gap, magic surging around me, and disappeared into a familiar darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Welcome to your new home,” a voice whispered. “I’ve made it comfortable for you."

No. Not again.

I lay half in shadow, half in light. Thick trees obscured the view on either side, silvery leaves catching the sunbeams filtering through the canopy. All else was smothered in shadow. The path ahead beckoned, enticing and light.

Behind lay death and confusion. Ahead lay uncertainty. But someone stood there on the path.

Avakis smiled at me with perfect white teeth, and reached for my hand.

His pointed ears, porcelain-pale skin and glistening dark hair painted him as far from human. He was too perfect to be anything but a prince from a storybook. The armour he wore was right out of a book, too—silver and black, a sword sheathed at his waist.

I’d never thought I’d ever need a fairytale prince to rescue me. At least, not before the world outside had turned into a horror story.

His smile widened as I took his hand. The skin was surprisingly soft, and up close the armour didn’t appear to be made of metal at all. The texture

was wrong. Like bark, maybe. But I was too captivated by his eerily handsome face to do more than follow.

No. Don’t do it. Please.

My past self blurred before my eyes, but in place of the image came worse memories.

It didn’t take long for Avakis to show his true colours. And by then, I was already ensnared in his trap.

Stop. Stop.

Whatever faerie trick this was, they were using *my* memories to trick me.

Ghosts didn’t exist here.

This was all inside my head: nothing more.

And I had one memory I didn’t mind reliving.

I watched myself stand before Avakis. A different day. We no longer stood in the forest but inside a high-ceilinged hall. Like every part of his house, shadows crawled from corners and masked everything but the area we stood in. He liked to keep the place dark, so we’d never be able to see anything creeping up on us.

“Avakis,” I’d said. “I challenge you.”

He’d squinted at the small object I held in my hands, and laughed. “You challenge me with that pathetic excuse for a weapon?”

I nodded, head bowed. I’d played my part well for three years. Meek.

Obedient. Helpless.

But I'd lived.

Iron was the only way to kill a faerie. It went without saying that Avakis didn't allow one single fragment of iron to enter his house. He'd been bringing humans into his home for three years now. I'd figured out where he brought them to, where he stripped them of everything they owned and threw their belongings into the dust.

A single, rusty nail was my salvation. The boy it belonged to was long dead. Why he'd been carrying it, I hadn't known.

Now, of course, I knew it was because the faeries had taken over our world, and the survivors had swiftly figured out the best way to defend themselves. At the time, that small piece of metal was my lifeline.

I was an untalented human, not even a witch or mage with any dormant skill. All I had were my wits and a hell of a lot of luck.

I concentrated on the memory above all else. Savoured the taste of the triumph as I held the faerie's sword in my hands, looking down at him.

"You traitorous bitch."

I brought the blade across his throat in a crimson smile.

His head fell back, blood spilling out—and blue smoke, too. Magic. His magic, the energy he'd drawn from all those tortured souls for the past three years—and god knew how much longer.

The magic wrapped around me, and I cried out. Not that it hurt, but because the magic was inside me. *And I couldn't make it stop. I screamed as the walls of the grand room fell apart on either side of me, screamed as bars fell off cells and dazed humans stumbled free, crawling into the sudden burst of blue light flaring from every part of me. I felt their pain, their fear, and yet I still couldn't make it stop.*

He's powered by it. That's why he needs us.

The thoughts had crossed my mind, but I was too busy running to dwell on it. I ran harder, bare feet pounding on the leaf-strewn path, heart thudding.

Please let me escape. Please. There must be a way out.

The smoke formed threads like fabric, stretching up through the trees and twining around my wrists.

“Let me go!” I screamed. “Let me out! I shouldn’t be here. I’m human, mortal. Please let me go back home.”

The magic writhed and tangled, forming a wall between the trees. I didn’t know how to control the magic, only that he gained more power the more people he captured. The more misery he caused.

I thought about the misery, all the years of pain and suffering at his hands. I thought of the pain, and the blue smoke thickened around me.

Faces began to appear in the fog.

“Please.” I reached out a hand. “Let me back. Please.”

Hands grabbed me, and an unimaginable coldness numbed my whole body. The forest was replaced by a torrent of smoke filled with indistinct faces and whispers.

“You don’t belong here,” one of them whispered.

“It isn’t your time.”

The faces faded in and out. Am I dead?

“Please,” I moaned. “I want to go home.”

Magic was a light in the dark, a blue cocoon protecting me from those nebulous, floating figures. Ghosts. Even then, I knew what they were. I even thought I recognised some of them. Are my parents here?

I spun around, desperate, but the faces faded away, and the numbness became complete.

Then sensation rushed back. I lay on the ground. No, grass. And above…

Sunlight. Real sunlight. I ran, not caring about the magic anymore—

because here was a path, a way I'd opened, and I needed to get out—to get home. Home.

My eyes flew open.

I lay on a path shadowed by trees with silvery leaves. All was silent.

Here we are. Here I was. The same place I'd landed. The same place I'd escaped.

But were the children here? Or were they still in Death? Either way, the person responsible must be here. He'd be waiting for me.

He's not Avakis.

Avakis. His magic… no wonder it had always felt so cold. From the other captives, I'd learned he was a Winter Sidhe who'd committed the ultimate crime and murdered a fellow lord. As punishment, he'd been exiled.

Others had been here, of course. The place between had had other lords divide up territory, but not in an organised way like Summer and Winter.

Any lord could kill another, and when they did, they took their power.

Avakis had killed both Summer and Winter. His magic was incomprehensible.

And now mine.

I pushed all thoughts of Avakis away, concentrating on the path. I never did learn the way around here. Faerie didn't go by the usual rules of directions,

shaping itself around whoever entered. It gave you what you asked… for a price.

When I'd escaped… I knew how I'd done it now. But not why Faerie had let me escape, and nobody else. Nor why the doors had closed behind me, cutting off the faeries forever.

Nor why this Velkas seemed to be the single exception to the rule.

I walked down the path, turning a corner into a clearing, and sure enough, someone waited ahead.

This faerie had jet black hair at shoulder length, and piercing blue eyes.

Like most faeries, he wore armour. As he belonged to neither Summer nor Winter, his armour was jet black edged with silver.

I knew that armour. He must have stolen it right from Avakis's corpse.

He smiled. "Ivy Lane," he said. "I thought you'd come to me. What kind of creature are you?"

"Human. You know that." I glared at him. "Why bother waiting here for me, if you can walk into my world whenever you feel like it?"

The faerie laughed. The sound was like tinkling water, like the gentle pressure on piano keys, and my magic blazed brightly in response. He smiled and shook his head. "Surely you'd have worked out that this is my territory. I'd rather have the advantage. Wouldn't you?"

Not when you're at the mercy of my iron blade. I gripped Irene tightly. He must know I carried a hell of a lot of iron weapons which could reduce him to ash in a second. What was he playing at?

"So what's the point?" I asked. "You promised half-bloods immortality, right? Your blood. Any reason? Or were you just fucking with them, like every goddamn faerie I've ever met?"

He laughed again. “You know a lot about faeries for a mortal. I shouldn’t be surprised, seeing as you killed Avakis.”

“Yes, I did,” I said. “And I’ll kill you, too.”

“I don’t think so. Avakis might have been blindsided by a mortal, but I’ve spent a lot of time amongst your kind. You’re weak. Even that Mage Lord of yours.”

I blinked. “So you’ve been spying on me. And trying to lure me here.

You’ve succeeded, haven’t you? There’s a path open between here and the mortal world, just as you wanted. The summoning circle took care of it for you. You never needed my magic.”

“You believe that?” Velkas smirked. “You believe I wanted your magic to open the ways between our realms? I intended to take Avakis’s magic for myself long before you were born, human. You aren’t worthy to wield the power of a Sidhe lord.”

“What, a lord of nowhere?” My heart thudded faster. He didn’t want to use my power at all. I’d been so fixated on the idea that the faeries wanted *me*, I hadn’t stopped to think of the value of Avakis’s power itself. Of course I hadn’t. I’d never, not in ten years, stopped to think what having their magic *meant.*

Like hell would I let this poser get his hands on it. Whether he wanted to conquer our world or not was irrelevant. He wanted my power: then I’d use it to burn him.

“Your world will yield to ours,” he said softly. “Summer and Winter might think they have your fragile mortal plane under their spell, but we are stronger than they know. With Avakis’s power, I will take these lands back under my control.”

“Huh. So you want to conquer this shithole, is that it?” I glared at him.

“What was all that about promising immortality to the half-faeries?”

“A king needs an army, doesn’t he?”

“You’re deluded.” Avakis’s armour fit the faerie perfectly, but he was still a stranger to me. The blade sheathed at his waist gleamed with silvery light.

An ash blade. “You aren’t Avakis. You’re not even a pale imitation, and I’m not afraid of you.”

Avakis had spent three years tormenting me. Three years of ghosts had haunted me, but I’d still prevailed. This faerie might have stolen Avakis’s armour, but he was nobody. A stranger I didn’t care to know.

Velkas hissed between his teeth. “Do you challenge me, then, mortal?”

Do you challenge me? Faeries couldn’t just hand over their magic to one another. It had to be stolen. Or ripped from their enemy’s decomposing corpse.

“Yes,” I said, my voice ringing through the clearing. “When I win, I get to escape, and take any mortals you have imprisoned here with me.”

The faerie lord bared his teeth. “You have too high an opinion of yourself.

If you defeat me, you get to live.”

Figures. “Fine. Let me guess. If you win, you get to take my magic and get to use it to take over the world.”

“Why stop with your world?” His eyes gleamed. “Even Summer will learn to serve me.”

“You were exiled for a reason,” I said, taking a mental note— *he’s from Summer.* That meant he’d wield some form of Summer magic. “And I’ve no intention of serving anyone. Ever.”

I couldn’t believe I’d ever found a faerie’s smile attractive. His lips pulled back from his teeth in a feral manner. Then he transformed.

Fangs sprouted and claws lengthened, biting into the earthen ground. Fur grew all over his head, which hunched over as his body expanded into the monstrous form of a hellhound. Four giant paws padded towards me. His voice was still fey. “Then die.”

He lunged.

Hellhounds? Seriously? His teeth snapped, and I jumped, blade flashing.

There must be a catch, because I could kill hellhounds in my sleep.

My sword carved into his neck—but he’d vanished.

That, too, was a classic faerie trick. I’d been dead right when I’d thought he was no match for Avakis. Defeating *him* had almost destroyed me. An invisible hellhound was hardly the most intimidating of Faerie’s creatures I’d faced. I kept quiet, listening out for the telltale sound of its footsteps.

Magic crashed over me like a fountain, smothering my body and trapping the breath in my lungs. I gasped, arms flailing, trying to see through the green haze obscuring my vision. *What the hell is this?* I might have said I was drowning, but my breath still came, albeit painfully. Like drowning, but being deprived of something other than air.

Like magic.

Oh. Shit.

I searched for the power that never failed to leap to my defence when faeries attacked me—and found nothing but suffocating blankness.

Calm down. My sword remained in my hands, a reassuring weight. So he could somehow dampen my magic. That didn’t mean I couldn’t win. I had other spells, besides. Speaking of… my pockets felt suspiciously light.

I scanned the trees. When nothing appeared, I inched my hand into my pocket for an explosive spell. Dust covered my hand, and when I pulled it out, black and grey fragments scattered on the ground.

Crap. He'd taken out all my spells and my faerie magic, in half a second.

And I couldn't even *see* the enemy.

That's what I got for complacency.

I just had my sword. My best asset. I scanned the trees, but saw no signs of disturbance. He was too clever. I'd have to go by instinct.

He couldn't have permanently taken away my magic. It was mine, even if I'd been too scared to really consider what it could do. Even now, I only used it defensively. But there must be a way. I was in Faerie. The magic was from here. I'd taken it from Avakis's corpse not five minutes from here.

Before I could move, a cascade of leaves swept up and caught me, whipping me against a tree. I grimaced as I landed on my feet, struggling to stay upright as the wind hit me with a force that bent the tree in two.

The leaves flew up again, spinning in a whirlwind. I screamed for real this time, the leaves whirling and slicing in a red dervish. I held my arms tight to myself, feeling blood soaking into my shirt. *Come on, magic. I need you.*

What had Vance said? I used magic defensively. Now, I needed to go on the offensive.

The wind kicked up, and another scream tore from my throat. I'd have fallen, but the whirlwind held me in place like I was flying, falling endlessly. My clothes whipped around me, and even the daggers sheathed all over my body were torn free. Only the sword in my hands remained solid, and it took every remaining ounce of strength I possessed to hang onto it. My arms, held to protect my face, stung like a thousand hornets attacked me. My face was wet with blood and tears. *Magic—come on.*

Blue light burned before my eyes, causing me to raise my arms again to shield myself from the glare. The stabbing pain of the movement almost made me pass out, and it took several seconds to realise the wind had died down.

Or something blocked it.

I chanced a look up. Leaves still obscured the view, but some kind of forcefield blocked the way. A pale blue divide between me and the slicing,

cutting wind.

Magic.

A fresh surge of energy numbed my arms. Before my eyes, glyphs swirled to life on my arms and hands, and the pain numbed to a familiar tingling.

Like a healing spell.

Blood still dampened my arms, but the pain had gone, like it never existed. The magical forcefield remained between me and the whirling leaves, though the wind had slowed. Like the faerie had realised I'd blocked his attack.

The hellhound beast appeared with a snarl, slamming its paws on the ground. I bared my teeth at it, and the magical barrier fell.

My blade flashed out with the enhanced speed from the magic. From *my* magic. The hellhound fell with a pained noise as blood poured from its neck. I drove it away, but with every step, resistance pushed me back. A shimmer in the air told me the faerie had a magical forcefield of its own. As the blood from its neck stopped flowing, the hellhound vanished.

The warrior that appeared in its place looked tired, but furious, silver eyes ablaze. "How dare you strike me."

He pulled out his own blade. The ash tree sword, gleaming in the moonlight now filtering through the canopy. I hadn't been aware day had switched to night, but time obeyed its own rules here in Faerie.

Shit. I need to finish this fast. Or else I'd lose ten years again.

The faerie struck, and ash met iron, shaking my whole body. Apparently, the wooden blade wasn't vulnerable to iron. I attempted to pull the sword

back—one touch would be enough to incapacitate him—but couldn't move.

Faerie magic thrummed around me, blue smoke swirling in and out of my arms. It couldn't work with the blade—iron and faerie magic were incompatible. I'd have to fight with one or the other.

Magic gave me speed to match the faerie's own, locking us in a deadly dance of metal on wood, blade on blade. The faerie's eyes went wide as I gained ground, driving it back, step by step.

"Give up," I snarled, pushing against his blade. I ought to have sliced it in two by now, but he'd plainly enhanced it with magic.

"You don't have the right to use Avakis's magic," he said. "You aren't one of the Lords of the Grey Vale."

"No one ever said life was fair."

The faerie's sword pushed against mine. Yeah, he'd definitely enhanced the weapon. I fought to remain in place, to keep pushing, but I was tiring, and he wasn't.

"Human," hissed the faerie. "You're weak. You don't understand how our magic works."

Blue tendrils swirled around me, intertwining with green tendrils that seemed to come from the faerie's sword. My own blade faltered, and my hands trembled. *No.* Sure, he was supernaturally strong, but so was I. I ought to be moving as fast as he was. The magic was still there.

Along with *his* magic. Those green strands tugging at my hands—though I couldn't feel them, they linked my hands with his weapon. As his magic pulsed brighter, a wave of exhaustion swept over me, and my blade dropped.

Holy shit. *He's draining my energy.*

"Summer still serves me, human," he said. I glared at him, sweat dripping down my face. My legs bent at the knees, wanting to fold over and collapse.

My sword felt too heavy to lift.

Summer. Summer fed on life energy. He'd been a powerful Summer Lord, if he could drain the life from me. Like Avakis had once fed on pain and suffering.

His magic is mine.

I felt for the strands of blue smoke still present, though smothered by Velkas's own magic. His blade moved towards my neck, and I desperately tried to raise my hands. It was like trying to move a car with my bare hands, but inch by inch, I managed to raise the end of my blade to block his.

It wasn't enough. In seconds, he'd push me aside and cut my throat, as I had Avakis's.

And he'd take the former Winter Lord's magic for himself.

The same magic swirling around me, even now. It fed on hopelessness and despair. I knew it now. Winter magic, by design, gained strength from death, or from dying. From pain. Up until today, my memory had been a

blank from the moment I'd fled Avakis's home to the second I tumbled out into the mortal world. But now I knew how I'd got out. The limitless pain of myself, of all his captives, had given me enough power to tear open a way back.

The spirits were still here—in some sense, at least. Maybe because we were so close to Death.

Panic lanced through me as Velkas kicked Irene out of my hands so hard, the momentum sent me crashing onto my back. Magic swirled before my eyes. Blue and green intertwined. Blue was mine. Winter. Magic that fed on death.

Was *Death* where I'd drawn the power from?

The ash blade stabbed at my face. I twisted over, survival winning out over crushing exhaustion, but not for long. He'd taken too much from me

already, and green streams of energy continued to flow between me and his weapon. *Hey. Stop that.* I pushed at the blue streams now flowing from my palms, and the twin energy streams actually knocked his aside.

I wasn't holding the iron blade any longer—and iron was poisonous to faeries. To faerie magic, too? I'd never even considered it. But this was the only option left.

I splayed my hands, and this time, magic answered. Like it had been waiting there the whole time. Velkas hissed out a furious breath as the magic knocked him back. *I used it as a weapon.* The blue streams of energy still pouring from my hands looked unwieldy, but I'd watched faeries use Winter magic enough times to know how it worked.

I recalled how I'd escaped. The pain and fear that had flooded me, giving me the strength to run, to find a way home.

I knew my own pain, still raw after all these years. I'd blocked it out, moved on, but here it lingered, in the place where nothing and nobody truly died.

My palms glowed blue, glyphs appearing and snaking across my skin as the pain and anger flooded me.

This time it didn't overpower me. It enhanced me, pushed me to draw on every screaming second of misery spent in this place. The past couldn't hurt me anymore. It only gave me strength.

I took all the raging magic and made it my weapon.

Magic overflowed from my fingertips, struck the faerie full in the chest and knocked him aside. The ash blade dropped to his side, his mouth parted in shock. The wound was deadly, but wouldn't be fatal. Not here.

I knelt and picked up Irene. The magic faded from my hands, but I was already lunging forward.

My blade brushed against his neck. Then I stabbed.

Blood spurted in a blue-red fountain, and the faerie's eyes turned glassy, blank. I staggered, exhaustion overpowering me again. The pain and anger lived on, pulsing in the air. Pain I'd never really forget. But that didn't mean I'd let it rule me.

I couldn't see the children. They might still be in Death. Once I got them out, I'd close the way back.

This time, I barely had to blink and blue smoke turned grey. A face appeared before mine, semi-transparent, as my pain and exhaustion faded into the background.

"You shouldn't be here."

"Here." I looked over my shoulder. The clearing had disappeared. *Whoa.*

Was it because the magic was stronger, the layers between the worlds weakening? Or was *my* magic stronger, now that I knew how to use it? "Are there mortal children here? I want to take them back home. You let me pass before."

"You were a child. It wasn't your time to die," said the transparent stranger. Human. A necromancer?

"And now is?" My voice caught on the word, try as I might to control it. I didn't think I feared death. Though my awareness of my physical body had shrank to vagueness, part of me still hadn't truly accepted I'd survived. I'd killed Velkas.

"No."

I breathed out. "I came here to save other souls that were brought into Death before their time."

"You have faerie magic. But you're human."

"I'm aware," I said. Winter magic. What kind, I still didn't know.

"You stole it."

“From a faerie,” I said. “He gained power from misery and despair. Is it the same for me?” Because no matter how awesome my power might be, I had better things to do but wallow in the past.

“I was a necromancer in life,” said the man. “Faerie magic isn’t my area.

But it’s entirely possible you can make the magic your own. You’re human, after all.”

“Yes.” I looked down at my body as it began to vanish into the fog. “I am.”

The man’s face disappeared, and all faded to blackness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Ivy.”

I knew that voice.

“Vance.” My eyes opened slowly.

“You’re alive.” There were worse sights to wake up to than Vance Colton leaning over me, covered in dirt and—snow? *Oh, right.* The blizzard. I’d forgotten he’d taken it into himself. Small cuts marked his face, but he appeared otherwise unhurt.

“So I am.” I coughed, my body deciding to remind me of all the injuries I’d suffered. The healing spell I’d used had taken care of most of the cuts on my arms, but I felt like I’d been hurled into the middle of a tornado. Every inch of me hurt, even after the faerie magic had healed the worst of my injuries. I needed a healing cleanse and a warm shower, in that order.

Instead, I launched to my feet and threw myself at Vance, almost knocking him off *his* feet. I could tell I’d taken him by surprise when he went still

instead of responding. Then his arms wrapped around me. “You brought her back. My cousin. She’s—she’s with the others.”

I sagged with relief, my arms still around him. *They made it.* “Isabel?”

“Also alive. Once you disappeared, so did the hellhounds.”

“Thank god.” I leaned my forehead against his chest. He was warm, and solid, his heart racing as fast as mine.

He pried my arms free. “I told you not to stand next to me when I shifted.

I might have killed you.”

“Think I was more concerned with the oncoming apocalypse,” I mumbled, but managed to pull myself upright without collapsing. The energy drain was back in full force, but I wobbled and stayed on my feet.

“I knew I made the right choice in recruiting you.”

I snorted. “In your dreams. In case you’ve forgotten, you coerced me by threatening my job.”

His mouth curved in a frown. “That wasn’t my intention. I think the two of us work well together.”

The heated spark in his eyes somewhat restored my flagging energy. Was he remembering the kiss, before we’d teleported here?

He leaned closer. Someone screamed my name. *Isabel.*

Goddamn faerie magic. Or mage magic. Whichever. I turned my back on Vance and ran to her, all exhaustion forgotten.

I hugged her, hard. “I thought—”

“You were dead,” she finished. “You’re the one who walked into the afterlife, you lunatic.”

“Technically, I walked into Faerie.”

“That’s even worse!”

I filled her in as we walked to the mages, who’d retrieved the two terrified teenagers who’d reappeared in the field like I had. Vance checked his mages for injuries, a young girl I assumed must be his cousin at his side. As for me, I could only marvel that I was alive.

I’m alive. We’re alive. We made it.

The bodies of the two necromancers lay outside the circle. As I watched, one stirred. The other, though… I’d killed him. Even in self-defence, I somehow didn’t think the necromancers would see it that way.

Yeah. I should probably avoid the guild for a while.

Vance approached Isabel and I. “You’ll need to report on this to the other Mage Lords. As I was a witness, it doesn’t need to be in-depth, but I do need to know what you did in Faerie today. In detail.”

“Take those kids back to their parents first,” I said. “Please. I’ll explain in the car.”

He nodded, to my surprise. He must have called for a bigger car, because the one that waited at the park’s edge was the size of a limousine. Lucky Vance wasn’t driving. Calls from the other mages interrupted us all the way there. Drake appeared to have been given the duty of watching the kids in the back, while Anabel Colton—Vance’s cousin—sat with them. I caught a glimpse of a shy-looking girl with big grey eyes hidden behind a sweep of dark hair, before the doors closed and we drove away.

I’d had an emotionally exhausting day already, and delivering the kids back to their parents damn near finished me off. I had to wipe a couple of tears away when we parted with Swanson’s dazed-looking son, at the final stop. Vance’s younger cousin remained in the back, with Drake. I assumed he wanted to question her at the manor.

But he asked to drop Isabel off at home first.

“Don’t worry,” she said to me. “I called the Cavanaughs and asked them to set up some new wards. They’re on it. We’ll be fine.”

Still, I worried. Sure, the wards we’d had were Isabel’s, not mine, but after last time I’d left her alone, I couldn’t help but wish I was there.

I didn’t want to leave Vance yet, either. When we reached the manor, he let Drake and his cousin out of the car first. And then we were alone.

“My story,” I said. I’d given him some of the details in the car, but these weren’t things I was comfortable sharing with other people. Even Vance himself. “You never asked how I ended up in Faerie.”

“I can put two and two together,” he said. “I looked at your records.

You’re listed as amongst those killed in the invasion. Your name’s on a grave in necromancer territory, as are your parents’.”

I looked away. Damn him for prying. Especially as I’d been considering giving him the information of my own free will. I’d about had it with confrontation for one day, so I just shrugged.

“Yeah.” I pushed open the door. “I’ll tell you what you need to know, then I’ll go. I have to get back to—”

His hand barred the way. “Wait. I wasn’t condemning your choice.”

My eyes stung and I shook my head. “I’m not in the mood, Vance. I kept my name because I didn’t want the faeries to take away my identity.

Nobody’s ever been nosy and interfering enough to go looking. Not even Larsen.”

He looked me, a deep frown on his face. “I heard what he did. You can’t work for him anymore.”

“That’s my choice, too.” Crap. This was *not* how I’d imagined this conversation going. I’d imagined a lot *less* talking, for a start. “Now our

arrangement is over, I'm free to get on with my job without having to report to you. Right?"

"If that's what you want." What did he want me to say? That it was okay for him to *spy* on me behind my back? "But you have an offer open to work here with the mages, if you'd like to."

"You mean, work for you," I said.

"As a freelancer," he said. "We'd pay far above the minimal rates that Larsen does. You'd be compensated for the risks you take, and you'd be allowed to choose which jobs you take on."

I hesitated. This was exactly what I needed. Which was precisely the problem. I worked alone. I didn't get tangled with mages, nor anyone else.

I'd almost been killed, and so had others, because of the faeries. Not to mention the hundred and one reasons working with Vance Colton on a daily basis was a *really* bad idea. Even if the mages' protection would come in useful after all the enemies I'd added to my list over the last few days.

"I just nearly died," I said. "And I still haven't told Larsen to go fuck himself."

Vance smiled at me. "I'd like to see that."

There was a gleam in his eyes again. His smile invited me to ask, to push this further. To pick up where we'd left off before the fight.

"You haven't won this," I informed him. "I don't take kindly to people snooping into my life."

"Not even if they're curious?" He tilted his head.

"You could have just asked me."

"And received a non-answer? Up until recently, I wasn't sure you weren't a dangerous enemy to the mages. I had to be certain. You're… a difficult

woman to read.” The look in his eyes turned into something deeper, more intense.

“I’m choosing to take that as a compliment.”

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. I was too startled to react as his lips lightly brushed against mine. My heart rate kicked up again, and all sensible thoughts melted away. This wasn’t a *we might die in five minutes* kiss. This was a tease, a promise of more, and damn, was I along for the ride.

“Lord Colton!” someone called from the manor.

Dammit. I let go of Vance’s shoulders, and he gave me a look that said quite clearly, *we’ll pick this up later.*

We’d better, I thought, climbing out of the car.

***

“Ready?” asked Isabel.

I nodded, opening the front door. Erwin the piskie flew in, shrieking.

“Oh my god,” I said. “I thought that faerie killed you.”

“Not dead!” he said. “Hiding.”

Would you believe I was glad to see the little bugger alive? Who’d have thought it?

First, though, I had an ex-boss to see. The red-brick building looked the same as ever, though I’d been told the majority of the mercs there had barricaded themselves inside when shit hit the fan. The necromancers had managed to keep the undead from leaving the cemetery and flooding the town, but everyone had felt the disturbance when the realms had briefly touched. The half-faeries, from what I’d seen, knew something was screwy on the other side. They’d make trouble, for sure, after Velkas had duped them. If immortality was what they really wanted, though, they’d be disappointed.

As for me, being alive was enough. I pushed open the door to the building with my head high and my sword at my waist.

“You,” said Larsen, leaning on the reception desk. Nobody else was in the lobby. I’d heard his receptionist had quit, for a start, as the rumours began to spread. Rumours I suspected Vance had encouraged, if not started.

“Surprised to see me alive?”

“No. Why would you think that?”

So he was going to play the innocent card.

“Let’s not waste time,” I said. “We both know you tried to get me killed, you despicable bastard. You damaged my property, put my flatmates in danger, and left me open to attack. I’ll certainly never be working for you again.”

Larsen’s mouth twisted into a snarl. “You’re a fool. There are no other jobs for people like you.”

“I beg to differ,” I said. “I’ve just received a generous offer from the Mage Lord himself to start a full-time freelance position.”

He gaped at me. “What?”

“You heard me. And by the way, I have faerie magic, and I know how to use it.” I removed my hand from my sword long enough to let anger fuel the blue light igniting in my palm.

Larsen paled. “That’s not allowed.”

“Says who? I don’t work for you anymore. But if you ever come near me again, you’ll regret it.”

And I left, the doors swinging shut behind me. I’d wanted to kill him, but even the Mage Lord couldn’t make me get away with murder. No. I’d have to be on my guard, but a pissed-off human was the least of my problems.

Besides, I wasn’t alone.

My phone buzzed. I hit the ‘accept call’ button.

“How’d it go?” asked Vance.

“As of today, I’m a full time freelancer.”

“So you’re considering my offer?"

“Yes.” I paused. “But with conditions. I’ll tell you about them later.”

“Done,” he said. “Are you free tomorrow?”

“Of course. No job, remember?”

“How about we continue our conversation from yesterday?”

I read ‘conversation’ as ‘making out’. That, I could get on board with. I drew in a breath. “That seems adequate.”

His chuckle vibrated through the phone. “I’ll see you at seven.”

Well, that was something. Or possibly a lot more than something. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t skip a little on the way home.

This wasn’t over. Now I’d drawn their attention, other faeries would come after me. I’d be a fool to expect otherwise. I still owed the Lady of the Tree a favour, for a start. And even with the new wards in place outside my house, more faeries knew about me than ever before.

Velkas had got to the mortal world without opening the veil. Which meant there were other ways. More faeries might come through. He’d pissed off a lot of people—no denying it. There’d be repercussions. Both here, and on the other side.

But for now, the day was mine. And it was about damn time I told Isabel what had really happened to me in Faerie.

***

Thank you for reading!

If you want to be notified when *Faerie Magic* (Book 2 in the Changeling Chronicles) is released, you can **sign up to my author newsletter.**

I hope you enjoyed *Faerie Blood.* If you have a minute to spare, then I'd really appreciate a short review. For independent authors, reviews help more readers discover our books. I'd love to know what you thought! Leave

a review for *Faerie Blood*.

Other books by Emma L. Adams

If you like your urban fantasy more on the otherworldly side, with double-crossing and dimension-hopping monsters, you might like *Adamant*, the first novel in the Alliance series.

Buy *Adamant.*

If you like the sound of YA urban fantasy with demons and sorcery set in a small English town with a sinister history, you might like the Darkworld series, starting with *Darkness Watching*.

Buy *Darkness Watching.*

If you like the sound of super-powered teenagers fighting inter-dimensional fiends in a post-apocalyptic world, you might like *Indestructible.*

Buy *Indestructible.*

About the Author

Emma writes edgy urban fantasy and young adult novels, including the Changeling Chronicles, the Alliance series, the Darkworld series and the Indestructible trilogy. She lives in the middle of England, but dreams of exploring the Multiverse. When she's not immersed in her own fictional worlds, Emma works as a freelance editor and proofreader and reads an improbable number of books.

You can find Emma in the following places:

Website Blog Facebook Twitter Newsletter

Document Outline

- Contents
- Title Page
- Copyright
- About Faerie Blood
- CHAPTER ONE
- CHAPTER TWO
- CHAPTER THREE
- CHAPTER FOUR
- CHAPTER FIVE
- CHAPTER SIX
- CHAPTER SEVEN
- CHAPTER EIGHT
- CHAPTER NINE
- CHAPTER TEN
- CHAPTER ELEVEN
- CHAPTER TWELVE
- CHAPTER THIRTEEN
- CHAPTER FOURTEEN
- CHAPTER FIFTEEN
- CHAPTER SIXTEEN
- CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
- CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
- CHAPTER NINETEEN
- CHAPTER TWENTY
- CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
- CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO
- CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
- CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR
- Want More?